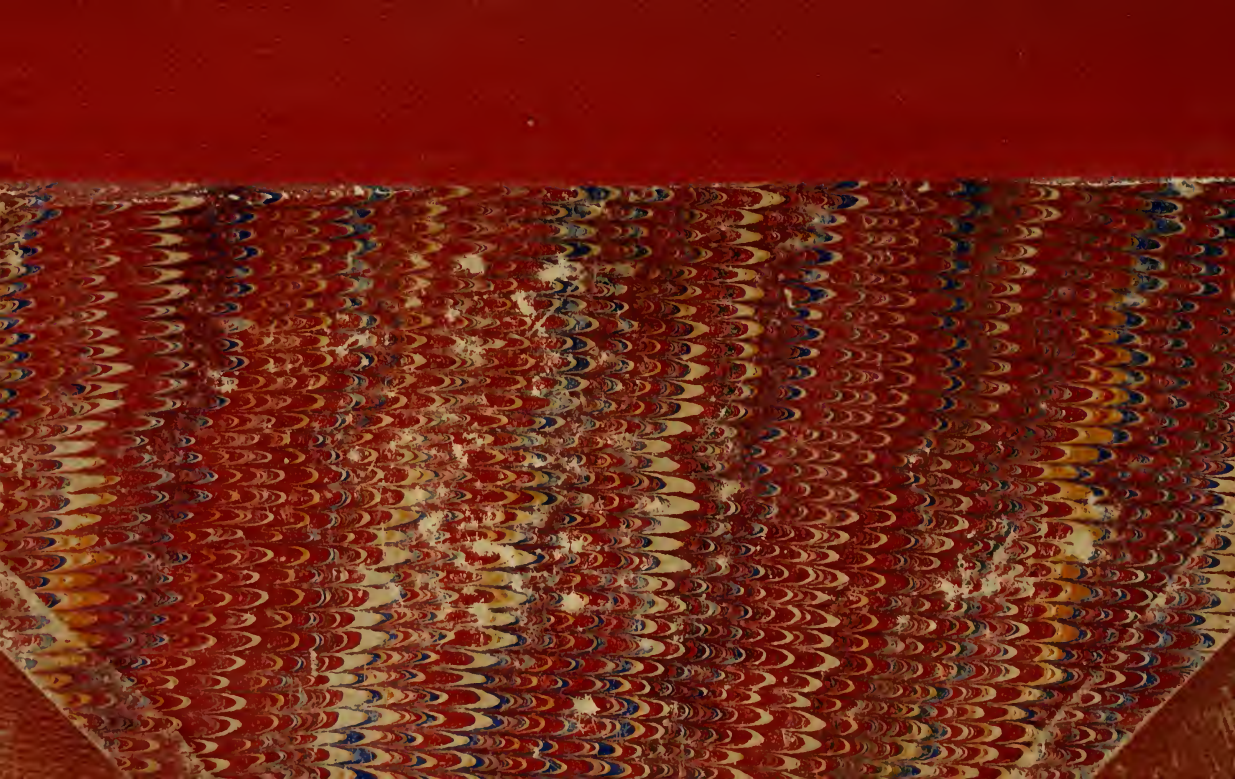

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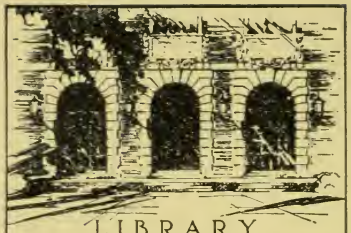

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MR SMITH

A PART OF HIS LIFE

BY

L. B. WALFORD

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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MR SMITH:

A PART OF HIS LIFE.

CHAPTER XVI.

I ONLY HOPE IT WILL GO ON SNOWING.

A WEARY man sat wearily by his dull fireside. He had seen no one all day except the doctor, who had called early, and stayed rather a shorter time than usual. He had read, and written, and arranged papers, and taken a nap, and looked at the clock, times without number, and still the unyielding hands pointed only to the hour of four.

It was the darkest, dreariest, weariest December day. A day on which everything seemed monotonous; a great round of stupidity. Meal-times were the only breaks, and they filled up again all too soon. Spun out to their fullest length, they averaged half

an hour each, and what was half an hour? A mere drop in that great bucket of time—that hopeless, woeful day.

Four o'clock! It was vain to look for any change. He must wait from four till five, and from five till six, and from six till—no, he would have dinner half an hour sooner; he really could not drag on till seven.

His hand was on the bell, but it was arrested; another bell pealed through the house.

Vain as he had declared it to look for change, vain to hope that any kind wind would blow a waif of Fortune to his door, he at once jumped to the happiest conclusion—"Visitors!"

The next step was to poke the fire into a blaze, to push the chairs into order, and then to wait nervously for what might be to follow.

What if it were nothing after all? A mistake. The wrong house. A tradesman's bill. A——

"Mr and Miss Tolleton!" announces the footman, in a loud cheerful voice, and Mr Smith's highest hopes are fulfilled. Nay, he had never dared to hope for this.

"My daughter would hardly come in," began Mr

Tolleton, starting on his lesson with the precipitation of one who has learnt it in a hurry; "she was so afraid of disturbing you. But it is beginning to snow a little, and I insisted on her not remaining out in the cold."

"I should have been very much disappointed if you had," said Mr Smith, looking at her. "I was going to thank you for giving me this pleasure, and now you have spoilt all. I find it was only on compulsion."

"Yes, indeed," continued her father, going on with his part; "it was just that. She came on compulsion. She did not wish to come in at all."

"Papa," said Helen, laughing, "you are very rude to Mr Smith. We thought, you know," turning to him, "that it would only be a bore to you to have people; but hearing you were unwell, we felt we should like to know how you were. All we wanted was to know that you were better."

"And your man would have us in," added her father, wondering what she could have meant by telling him he was rude, after he had been drilled into saying the very things he had said. "Nothing

else would do. I wanted him at least to ask—but no; he looked quite affronted at the idea."

"And well he might be," said his master. "John knows better than that. I really believe he has felt a spark of human pity for me to-day. He gave me a pathetic look when he came in with luncheon, and provided an extra roll. If he had let me be cheated out of the only pleasant thing I have had since morning, he would have deserved dismissal on the spot."

"You have had a dull time of it," said Mr Tolleton, with interest. "I wish I had known; I would have called much sooner."

He was very kind. Mr Smith would have been glad of his company. Anew he expressed his regrets.

"I can regret nothing now," said the host, courteously. He was looking at Helen, and she caught him in the act. How could he help looking at her? She had come to be looked at.

"And what have you been doing with yourself?" said she, at last. It was time for her father to subside.

"Reading, most of the day."

A pile of books lay on one side of the sofa; she took one up and read the title.

"'You may have heard of it," said he, playfully. His spirits had all returned.

"Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress.' But I thought that was a child's book."

"If it is, I am a child in enjoying it. It is a great book of mine. Those are good illustrations, are they not?"

"Yes, beautiful."

"That is the land of Beulah you see—one of the best, I think; and this of the shepherd boy—the shepherd boy in the Valley of Humiliation. One of the most touching parts in the book; don't you think so?"

"Very pretty. I remember something about a boy, though it is a long time ago," said Miss Tolleton, feeling that a boy could never interest her as a man would.

"Yes, so it is; how long ago you may imagine. I can remember it!" said he, misunderstanding her. "It is one of the earliest recollections of my life. My mother had a curious old copy with dried cotton rushes in it, and a Giant Despair the size

of a whole page. How the scent of that book in the cotton rushes came before me to-day! I don't know that anything brings back associations more strongly than a faint well-remembered scent. Something must have brought it up, though I could not find out what."

"Camphor?" cried she, eagerly catching at a subject on which she was again at home. "Don't you know how the smell of camphor seems to open an old drawer, and show you all the strange old brocaded gowns, and fur boas, and flapping hats?"

"That is a lady's experience," said Mr Smith, laughing. "Mr Tolleton, you must not keep looking out of the window all the time. It is going to snow, snow, snow, for the next four-and-twenty hours."

Mr Tolleton looked blank. "I hope not, sir, I'm sure."

"Why, it will not matter to you. You are safe within doors now, and when I do release my prisoners, I shall send them home. Pray, make yourself easy. You will not get away for some time, I can tell you."

"Oh, there is no hurry; only if it goes on like this——"

"The roads will not be impassable for good strong horses like mine."

"Take out your horses on such a day! I couldn't think of it, sir."

"Why not? It will be a treat to them to get out. They have had no exercise, except what the groom gives them, for three weeks.

"No, no. Helen, we could not do that, could we? This snow is nothing; it will clear off in a quarter of an hour. We can walk home nicely."

"Oh dear, yes, papa; it is no distance."

"Very well," said Mr Smith, ringing the bell; "we shall see. You are not going yet, at all events. John, bring tea, and ask Mrs Bacon to let us have some German cakes. Now," turning to Helen, "let me see you take off your hat, and look at home." The words slipped out before he meant.

"But what if other people come in? I should look rather odd." No, he need not think they had escaped her; they were music in her ears.

"Look outside, and see if that is probable. No, trust me, I shall have no other neighbours as kind

as you. No one else would come out who could stay at home."

So saying, he put another log on the fire, and she quietly laid aside her hat.

"And this?" said he, touching her warm fur.

She put it off also.

"Well, you look very snug," said her father, after a minute's contemplation. "I—I think I shall take off my gaiters."

"Do!" cried his host—"do! Now this is charming; now I feel I am not altogether alone in the world. It is something to live in a place where there are friends like this. You have read me a lesson. I had been a regular misanthrope all day."

Mr Tolleton laughed from not knowing what to say. A deprecating, complimentary laugh. A laugh that was ready to follow any lead pointed out to it.

"So you see it is worth the sacrifice," continued Mr Smith.

"Sacrifice! I can answer for it there is no sacrifice," exclaimed Mr Tolleton, who knew now what he was about. "None on my part, I can tell you; and as for Helen, she looks uncommonly well pleased with everything."

"Indeed," said she, turning her smiling face toward him, "I only hope it will go on snowing."

Oh, how pleasant it all was!

Attracted by the now radiant firelight, a large black cat here strolled out from beneath the sofa, looking half asleep. "Oho, pussy! are you there? I thought you had gone to the kitchen," said her master, stroking the soft back as she fawned against his legs. "There!" lifting her up on his companion's knee. "Now, lie down and behave yourself. Many a cat would give a great deal to be where you are."

Helen's long white fingers sank in the fur, and she twisted pussy's ears, and pulled out its claws, with quite the air of a cat lover. She really did like creatures. If the cat had not been Mr Smith's, and he had not with his own hand lifted it up, she would still have allowed it to snuggle on her knee.

It was some time before tea came, and Miss Tolleton suspected they were not accustomed to it in the bachelor household.

When John did at length appear, he formed a contrast to the expert Corker. The tray was borne in before him, but seeing no place vacant, it was borne out again. Reappearing trayless, it was

evident that, but for the company, he would have scratched his head. The library table was commodious, but far from the fire and from every one. There was only one other in the room, and it was covered. His master's "Take off the books, John, and bring that table here!" was a blessed relief.

"Your low tables delighted me so, that I have taken the liberty of copying them," said he. "I sent an order to Gillow's the same week, but they are not arrived yet. This is an old-fashioned tea-table, but I know you will take charge of it for me."

Of course she would; she liked it all the better. The fine white tablecloth, with the formal set out, the painfully precise plates and knives, the great silver butter-pail, and the hissing urn, so unlike the little knowing arrangements at Freelands, seemed to suit her at that moment better than anything else.

"If you please, sir," said John, in a sepulchral whisper, ere he left the room, "Mr Bowling is come, sir."

"Come? I am glad to hear it. I shall see him by-and-by. But he ought not to have come on such a day."

"Are we keeping you from any one now, pray——"

began Mr Tolleton; but his host said hastily, and again unconsciously addressing the daughter, "Indeed, no. It is only my butler, who has been ill and at home for two months. I shall be right glad to have him back again. John!"

The footman stopped.

"Any one else come?"

"Yes, sir; they're all here. The woman——"

"Tell Mrs Bacon to take good care of them. She knows all about it. Poor creatures! To think of coming on such a day."

Helen looked ready to be sympathetic. "A poor family come to be looked after. Perhaps they will do for one of the lodges, Miss Tolleton. We must design some more plans some day."

Miss Tolleton was brightly acquiescent. But what an odd idea to have a whole family of poor people arriving in that way! What an odd man! She rather liked him for it. As for lodges, she was ready for *them* to any amount.

"What a pretty urn!" exclaimed Mr Tolleton, with great earnestness. "What a very pretty urn! I really think it is the prettiest urn I ever saw!"

The difficulty of maintaining conversation with

Mr Smith, when Mr Smith would answer everything he said, to his daughter, almost overcame him. It was all right, of course, and very satisfactory that it should be so. But still he felt he ought to make himself heard sometimes. After the way he had talked at his own house too. He could think of nothing now. Even to have the tea-urn to admire was something.

They did not want him, those two, chatting away side by side on the sofa. Apparently they found plenty to say to each other, and he felt that if it were possible for him to subtract the newspaper from under Mr Smith's feet, he might read it comfortably, without his voice ever being missed. It was a little hard, that for decency's sake this privilege should be debarred him.

Helen seated herself at the table. How she enjoyed the German cakes, and her second cup of tea! She had given herself up to the pleasure of the passing hour.

"This is so much nicer than dinner," said she, sincerely.

Her father looked up, alarmed. Was it possible there were designs upon his dinner?

"Don't be afraid for me, papa. I cannot resist these delicious cakes, and I never care about dinner."

"But, my dear, I suppose—you don't mean that there is—eh?"

"Oh dear, no; I am no bird of ill omen. Your dinner is quite safe, papa. I was merely thinking of myself."

"Ah, you will be glad enough of yours too by-and-by. A sharp walk will soon bring back your appetite."

"Meantime there is no chance of the walk," said Mr Smith, pointing to the window, against which the snowflakes were falling faster than before. "Pray, Mr Tolleton, let us hear no more about that walk. If it clears at all, it will be dark by that time. You would not be so cruel as to leave me for a long time yet. Let us forget all about it, until it is time to send to the stables."

All this was to Helen, in spite of the opening appeal to her father.

She looked at the window, looked at her host, said "Thank you," and the thing was settled.

By-and-by she resumed her seat upon the sofa.

Whether he motioned her to it, or whether she had gone of her own accord, she hardly knew.

Black pussy reasserted its rights.

"Is it always here?" said she.

"It generally manages to find its way here in the course of the day."

"And have you had it long?"

"Several years—about five years, I think. But some friends had charge of it for me till lately."

"It reminds me of one I have seen somewhere. Ah, I know! It was at Aytoun Abbey."

"Aytoun Abbey! Of course it was; it was my very cat. How curious! how extraordinary! Poor pussy! I suppose it could hardly be expected to remember you. Yes," he continued, in a slightly constrained voice; "Mrs Aytoun kept it for me all the time I was in Greece. They are coming to spend Christmas at Sauffrenden, and, I daresay, will like to see my pussy again."

All the time he spoke, he was looking her steadily in the face, and she as steadily was looking at him.

("Can she have heard?")

("Can he have heard?")

Then they began again. Helen spoke first; but

for every word she said aloud, a mocking monitor within said two.

"It was Colonel Aytoun whom my father knew; but our knowledge of him was very slight. It is several years since I stayed at the Abbey." ("Coming to Sauffrenden! The very man of all men I should hate to have there! How dreadful! how intolerable! I must not think of it, or I shall show it in my face. I *must* be on my guard.") "They are old friends of yours, then, I suppose?"

"Yes; very old—acquaintances." What! he had a voice within, too. ("That man shall never be owned as a friend by me. She can have heard nothing, however, or she would never have said this.")

"It will be pleasant to meet, if it be only for a few days."

("Oh, if it were only for a few days we might manage; but if it should be for long!")

"Yes; Lady Sauffrenden and Mrs Aytoun are first cousins, though Mrs Aytoun is considerably older. This is their first visit."

"They came in the old days, it was there we met him," said Helen. She was bent on taking the matter easily; it must not be avoided for the world.

Then a possibility occurred to her. "Mrs Aytoun, however, I have really never seen. She is such an invalid.

"She is, unfortunately; but she has not always been so. You don't know her? Oh, she is the one to be known."

"Perhaps this time—but their stay will be too short. A mere day or two, I suppose?" ("Why will he not tell me? If he only knew how much it is to me! Oh, what a break-up it might be! Just when all was going smoothly. Why must this trouble come now, of all times?")

"I have no idea. They never stay long anywhere."

A dawn of relief—a faint grey dawn. And this was all he could give her.

The subject was now dropped outwardly, though faster than ever talked the voices within.

"Your father is tired," said Mr Smith, glancing at the opposite arm-chair, where Mr Tolleton, overcome at last by the extreme difficulty of making conversation, the comfortable chair, the warmth of the room, and the humming monotony of the two tongues opposite, had fallen into a gentle doze.

Helen smiled. "He often takes a nap before dinner, and we never disturb him."

"Most gentlemen take their nap after dinner."

"Do you?"

"That is not fair. I have no inducement to keep me awake."

"I suspect the inducement sometimes fails."

"Not when it is strong enough."

"When is it strong enough?"

"When it is a wife."

A wife! She would have started, buckled on her armour, prepared for conquest on the spot, if only—he had said it with a little less decision, more hesitation, more significance.

"And the wife must be——?" said she, carelessly.

"If she were my wife, that would be enough."

"It is not always enough," with considerable emphasis.

He flushed up. "No, you are right, Miss Tolleton. I spoke in all the arrogant spirit of ignorance. Still I think—but I don't know—I am talking of what I know nothing."

The voice within was prating at this moment loudly.

("Never, Emmeline, never. Had you been my wife, you had never been the wan pale woman that you are. You would have been loved and cherished as a tender flower. Faded and drooping if it must have been, you would still have found a support, strong till death. My wife, how I would have loved you!")

"What were you going to say?" It was the softest woman's voice in the world that recalled him.

"I—I beg your pardon."

"Am I impertinent? But I should like so much to know. You spoke as if there were something on your mind. Pray, don't answer me if you had rather not."

He thought if he were ever to tell any one, it would be her.

"I had fallen into a foolish dream, Miss Tolleton, that was all; a bad habit caught by living alone. A wife" (he spoke boldly and laughingly now) "would have cured me of it. What a pity my chance is gone by!"

She wished he had not laughed; the laugh spoilt everything. She could not talk softly again. She could not wistfully penetrate into the foolish dream.

She was thrown back into the broad daylight of commonplaces.

Badly as he was behaving, however, he showed one good sign; he did not quit the subject. He treated it lightly and negligently, but he continued it. She might win him back to tenderness again, if she had only time. Mr Tolleton slept soundly, and that was the only thing that gave her hope.

"Men always laugh at women," said she, pettishly; "but I did not expect it from you."

"I laugh? My dear young lady, what could put that idea into your head?"

"Why, you laughed just now."

"A miserable fox-and-the-grapes laugh at myself. Why, I am a warning to everybody—a beacon. Imagine anybody believing me if I laughed at a wife."

"I am afraid you are very sarcastic."

"And I am afraid you are very sceptical."

She had no patience with him.

Snowing, snowing, outside. Within, a dim room, a sleeping chaperon, silence, and safety. It was hard on Helen. She could not make any impression. He slid out of her gentle grasp. He bragged of his freedom to her very face.

Such behaviour was not to be borne. She must have him now, come what would.

After a minute's thought she said—"I am afraid I am rather sore on the subject, that is the truth. It is always so strongly on my mind what my dear father lost as a wife, and we as a mother, that I never feel inclined to laugh about it. I daresay it is very silly."

He was grave in an instant. Her arrow had sped at last.

"No, indeed; the feeling does you honour. You must miss your mother dreadfully."

"The worst of it is the not missing her, I believe. We hardly realise what we have lost, we only feel it." She had said the same thing before, and it struck her as rather good. Besides, the sentiment was genuine, and when she could be genuine, she would. "If our mother had been alive," said Helen, with the utmost sincerity, "we should never have grown up the wild, giddy girls we are."

"My dear Miss Tolleton, who would ever accuse you of giddiness?"

"I accuse myself."

"Then that is enough. Even if the accusation be

true, it is enough. To accuse one's self is to be sorry, and to be sorry is to amend."

"But it is so difficult."

He looked surprised.

"One gets run away with, you know. My sisters and I have high spirits, and there is no one to hold us in. No," looking at her father, "really no one. Then, when it is over, we are sorry. But I daresay people say we are dreadfully flighty."

"Indeed, I never heard it said." But at that moment he remembered Lady Sauffrenden. Was this what she meant? How stern, how harsh, such a judgment! And they, in their poor, bright, happy spirits, had had that said of them. It was cruelly unjust.

Helen went on. She was anxious to pursue this topic. Who could tell what he might hear of her soon?

"I do wish I were more serious," said she, with a sigh.

"You are too young to be serious, my dear." He had suddenly put on a paternal air. "No, I should not put you off with nonsense like that. No one is too young to be serious—very serious at times. But

a light-hearted gaiety is one of the brightest ornaments of youth, and it is not meant to be curbed and checked at every turn."

"But when it leads us astray?"

"We have a Father to return to, not a stern frowning Judge."

Her eyes dropped.

"Will you not tell your Father?"

"Indeed, indeed," said she, with sudden fire, "that is what I wish. I often hate myself. And I feel so ashamed, I think I will never give way again. I will try to get good and quiet like other girls. But then it is always the same thing over again."

"Don't look so hopeless; be sure it is not. The temptation must grow weaker or stronger. Try to let it be weaker."

"How?"

"Watch and pray."

She could not speak, and her breathing came quick and short. He thought she was offended.

"Have I said too much?"

"Oh no."

"Say you forgive me, then."

"I forgive! Oh, you don't know; you would

not say that, if you did. You do me good; you could make me good. I—I mean—I hardly know what I say, Mr Smith. No one ever talked to me like that before."

His hand was laid on hers for a moment.

"It is you——" But he got no further. The tables were turned upon her once more, and he had the best of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SHORT EXPLANATION.

THERE is no need to make a mystery of Mr Smith's past life. He was neither a changeling, nor an impostor, nor one without right to his name and fortune. He was no left-handed offspring of a noble house.

He came honestly, of a comfortable, homely stock. He had been designed for a mercantile life, and people who knew nothing about him believed he had made his money in mercantile transactions. This, however, was not the case. It had been left him at so early an age that he had been able to reap the full benefit of it. He had been to Oxford, and travelled.

But, nevertheless, his life had a story.

When he spoke to Helen Tolleton about the Aytouns, he was anxious to discover whether it had

ever reached her. He had got his present information about them from the newspapers. Under the heading "Fashionable Intelligence" this paragraph had arrested his attention: "Col. the Hon. Egerton Aytoun and Mrs Aytoun, from V——, the seat of the Duke of L——, for Sauffrenden Castle, to be the guests of Lord and Lady Sauffrenden during Christmas."

He had not been able to read the announcement without emotion.

Emmeline Just, the gentle, beautiful girl, and Emmeline Aytoun, the sickly, dwining wife, meant the same person to him.

Twenty years ago he had been her suitor, and no unacceptable one. There was no grey in his temples then. He was black-haired, red and sunburnt, and though not tall, well formed and broad-shouldered. The singular sweetness of his voice, the charm of his manner, the nameless attraction which still, when he was stout, and grey, and fifty, drew people towards him, were in full play. He was in the meridian of life. A man with manhood's experience, manhood's maturity, manhood's deliberate self-knowledge; yet with the resolute, determined hope of youth.

He spoke, and was listened to.

Her parents approved the match, for he was rich and respectable, and they, the poor relations of a noble family.

It would place Emmeline again in her proper sphere. It would help forward the boys. It would be a wonderful relief in every way.

They must not expect everything. He had brought money, and they must yield birth. Poor souls! They would gladly have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage.

Accordingly all went smoothly for a season. The wedding-day drew near. Presents, dresses, plate, furniture, all the pleasant bustle of the occasion pervaded the house.

Old Lady Just fell ill. She was to have been present. She had made a push to come, so delighted was she—were they all—with the match. A note came from her, so sorry, so vexed, to have to give it up, but the doctor had said she really *must;* and so, of course, there was no resisting that fiat. She should think of them all on *the day,* and hoped to be *quite well,* and down-stairs again by the time *dear* Emmeline and her dear new nephew came to the

Towers. They would not, of course, *think* of putting it off.

She wrote this two days before she died, and the wedding was put off for a month.

It was but a short delay, and the pleasant bustle continued to go on in undertones.

Then came Colonel Aytoun, with his high-sounding name, his sparkling uniform, his fair moustache; going to his review, listening to his band, hearing of his ball; and the old thing happened which happens over and over again.

Poor bride! How hard she strove to behave well, but she had not the power. She had neither the force of character to conquer, nor the hypocrisy to pretend.

Her struggles, her dejection, her pining away, were too evident.

What lover would not know what these things meant—his voice no longer the one to please, his smile a sting, his gifts coals of fire?

There was nothing to be done, no one to be angry with.

All was quietly surrendered, the parents consoled, —it was he who had to console them—and thou-

sands of miles put between himself and happiness.

Some years after, they met again. Four years, but how she was altered! The beauty was there, perhaps, but the life, the spirit of it was gone.

His brother officers said it was his doing. Every one knew what Eggy Aytoun was, the only wonder being that any parents would give their daughter to him. A regular riff. And yet he was as jealous of any one speaking to her as if he were a pattern husband. Nobody dared take notice of her. It was a pity she knocked under so much. A wife with a temper of her own might have tamed him, but she had no chance with such a fellow.

And then they all agreed that she was a poor thing; and danced as often as they possibly could with her on every opportunity, finding a delightful stimulation in the scowling face behind; and thoughtlessly, not cruelly, drawing down those black looks and words, from which they should have shielded her.

Colonel Aytoun was one who cared for nothing unless it were new. While it was new, it was all in all. His betrothed had been lovely, perfect, for a

few weeks; the wedding-ring was scarcely on her finger before he found her insipid.

To his vanquished rival he magnanimously affirmed he bore no malice.

He was invited to the Abbey. Emmeline was set to ask him, and for her sake he went. Why his presence was desired was soon clear. He was a sheep to be shorn of its fleece. He had been robbed already of his one ewe-lamb, and now more was required.

He thought it over, and allowed himself to be swindled.

Colonel Aytoun was rampant. He was not rich, but over and above the pleasure of having these reinforcements to a short purse, it was a most delightful occupation of his talents to take in the man to whom he bore no malice.

It was charming to be able to tell Emmeline of the last rise he had taken out of that simpleton—her lamented bridegroom; to wonder how she had really not been rather ashamed of selecting such an imbecile, harmless though he was; to suppose that it might have been a case of "birds of a feather;" and then to grin and jeer at her with his smiling red lips, and

bid her go and seek the society of such a congenial spirit, for he was sick of keeping company with babies out of long clothes.

O Emmeline, Emmeline!

It was for this he did it. He, the unforgiven —the forgiving; the injured—the benefactor; the forsaken—the one friend; he was all she had to look to.

Pure, true heart, he did it for this! Loving and honouring still, yet faithful in its guard as an angel's guard, the heart was loyal, and the conscience clear.

He would never desert her while it was within his power. Colonel Aytoun might have his wretched hundreds—they were the price he was ready to pay. But his coarse companionship, his patronage, his affected friendliness, were harder to be borne.

And Mr Smith was not a man who took things easily. He never made-believe to himself. His charity might cover the multitude of sins, but he was perfectly aware they were there.

Some, perhaps, would have said there were good points about Colonel Aytoun. He did not believe there was one. In his heart he considered him the

wickedest, worst, most *disagreeable* man he had ever met in his life.

And yet he stayed at the Abbey.

When he was not there, Emmeline was often months alone. She was not allowed to visit, and few people cared to visit her. Bold, doubtful ladies came now and then, her husband's friends; very, very rarely, ladies who were neither. These never came twice. They were scared by the strange ways of the house, overwhelmed by the monopolising attentions of the host in the first instance, and thunderstruck at the neglect which was sure to follow. The spiritless, timid wife gave them a chill. They breathed freely only when the iron gates had clanged behind them, and then they vowed never to come again.

As for men, they were not invited, with the exception of Mr Smith. Colonel Aytoun was not clever enough to draw money from any one who was not prepared to let it go. He could not win at cards or at billiards, and he found it unprofitable to try.

He did not want associates, and assuredly no one wanted to associate with him. He was universally

unpopular. Men as repulsive called him repulsive; men as needy sneered at his neediness. He was bad, and he was poor. He was disliked on both accounts.

It gave Mr Smith an uncomfortable feeling to hear Miss Tolleton say she had stayed at the Abbey. At first, for Emmeline's sake. He was jealous of any one spying out the secrets of that prison-house. Old as his love-tale was, its dear inhabitant was as dear to him as ever; and as anxiously as ever would he shield her if he could, from the cold pity which the world bestows on those who are no longer able to adorn it.

But second thoughts soon came in. Miss Tolleton had owned to no acquaintanceship with Mrs Aytoun. She kept her room, no doubt, when they were there. But still, a young girl, staying in the house, it might surely have been expected she would find her way there.

Colonel Aytoun had been at the bottom of it. He had kept them apart—kept this pleasure from his dreary wife. Probably he had tried to make friends with Helen himself. If so, he thought he could tell

with what result. Her high spirit would ill stand his fawning adulation.

She had repulsed him with contempt. He had been disgusted and defeated. It was no wonder that she had repudiated the idea of anything beyond the very slightest acquaintanceship.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER RETROSPECT.

If Mr Smith believed that Colonel Aytoun was nothing to Helen, she would have been surprised beyond measure had she been told that Colonel Aytoun's wife was anything to Mr Smith.

She had never suspected him. All her tremors, her outward composure, her inward agitation, were for herself. While in his company she had kept these thoughts down with a high hand, resolved on this at all costs, that she would banish from her countenance every tell-tale look, from her voice every unnatural tone.

And she had succeeded. Her visit had gained for her all that it ought to have done. The few serious words at the end still sounded in her ears.

Yet there was food for meditation. He liked her,

he admired her, he all but loved her; but—that was the point.

She knew that he had pressed her hand at parting, and she could recall more than one fervent gaze. She felt that she had touched him, but still she had not won him; and the more difficult he was to be won, the more worth the winning he became.

Her spirit would have risen to meet the difficulty but for one drawback. Between her and him had arisen a sudden cloud—a cloud so thundery, so dangerous, so close at hand, that she felt unable to cope with it, unless she had support.

Lily rallied her sister on her thoughtful aspect several times during the evening, but desisted with some alarm on receiving a whispered communication that she should hear all when they were alone, and that it was nothing to laugh about. She seized her sister's arm to ask only one thing, Was it all right with—she knew who?

"Yes, yes," replied Helen, impatiently. "But it may go wrong yet. I am going to tell you all about it, if you let me alone now."

Carry went off to bed, unsuspecting that there

was anything to be told. She liked to have a room by herself, and the other sisters slept together.

Before she left they had put on their scarlet dressing-gowns, shaken down their hair, and, brushes in hand, drawn their chairs close to the fire.

"This is cosy," said Lily. "Now let me hear it. But first, why did you mind Carry's knowing?"

"Because she never can be careful. I am going to tell her a little, however, as soon as I have thought it over. It is a dreadful bore, I can tell you, Lily."

"Is it?" said Lily; "you look as if it were. I have been thinking what it can be, all evening, but I cannot imagine, unless that George Lance——"

"George Lance! I don't care twopence about George Lance! What could have put him into your head? We shall never see him again."

"Well, you know, Nelly, everybody said——"

"Oh, never mind!" cried her sister, with an impatient jerk. "George Lance, and what everybody said, may be at the bottom of the sea for all I care! This is quite different."

"What is it, then?"

"The Aytouns are at the Castle."

"And what are the Aytouns to us?" responded Lily, with unfeigned surprise and some disappointment. Her expectations had been wound up to a high pitch.

"You were such a child when we knew them that you scarcely remember, but their coming may be a great deal to us."

"I thought you and he had been rather friends."

"So we were."

"And he gave you that lovely dagger-thing."

"Pish!"

"Give it to me, then."

Helen made another impatient jerk.

"I was going to offer you a bargain for it the other day," Lily went on, innocently. "When I saw it lying in your rubbish-drawer, I knew you had given over caring for it, and it is a pity that it should be wasted. There is either Uncle Robert's locket, or perhaps I might be induced to let you have the coral. You know you want the coral, and you have not worn the dagger for months. I believe," she added, laughing, "that you are afraid Mr Smith may inquire into its history!"

"It is that," said Helen, emphatically, "which I *am* afraid of."

"There is no harm if he did, Nelly. Girls often get presents. He might as well take a lesson, and give you something nice himself."

"How little you know him!" exclaimed her sister. "Now Lily, listen, and do not talk any more nonsense. Mr Smith is as different from Colonel Aytoun as—an angel of light from an angel of darkness!"

Lily laughed aloud. "Oh, good heavens! Mr Smith an angel of light! What next?"

"Oh, *do* be quiet!" groaned her sister. "I want help so much, and you do nothing but laugh. I had better say no more."

"No, no, Nelly; I am quite grave now. Mr Smith is an angel, an archangel, if you will. I won't laugh again. Now for Colonel Aytoun."

"Well, you remember our staying at the Abbey, just after I left Madame Voucher's? When Aunt Maria would not hear of my being introduced, because I was only seventeen. The Aytouns were at Sauffrenden that summer, and we met them there once or twice, and he came here, and made such a

point of our going to the Abbey, that papa and I went without Aunt Maria's knowledge. We had quite a proper invitation, but when we went there Mrs Aytoun was shut up in her room. We never saw her at all, and I am sure now that she did not choose to see us. One could not wonder at her, for every one knows the way he behaves; and he did—did make a great deal of me on all possible occasions. Of course, in his own house, he had it all his own way. We two were together all day long. He managed either to send papa out fishing or shooting, and stay at home with me; or else to take me driving in the curricle, and be afraid there was no room for more than two. As it happened, I am glad he was so rude to papa, for papa had been so charmed with him at first, that if his civilities had continued, papa would never have been detached from him."

"But it was rather good fun for you."

"Oh dear, yes. I thought it the best fun in the world. We used to go wandering about the old ruins together, listening to the owls in the ivy, reading poetry, and singing duets in the drawing-room in the dusk. And then I went fishing with him, and once we took luncheon with us, and were not in the whole

day. Papa did not altogether like that, and I got a lecture when he smelt me of smoking; but I coaxed him into forgetting it. We were there nearly three weeks, and then papa said we must go. But Colonel Aytoun would not hear of it. He knew papa's weak side, and flattered him; and you know there was no absolute reason why we should not stay. No one was at home, and we had no other engagements, and I, like the silly girl I was, told this to Colonel Aytoun, and we laughed over it, and I said papa *should* stay; and stay he did."

"And when did you begin to dislike him?"

"Oh, only the last evening, and I think the dislike has grown since."

"Have you seen him since?"

"That was he—that man I told you not to look at, at Crewe Station. He did not see us, and I don't want either you or Carry to know him, if you should ever meet. Who would have thought of their coming to the Castle, when we heard Lord Sauffrenden and he had quarrelled? That must have been a mistake, or else they have made it up again. Mr Smith could have told me about it, I daresay, but I could not ask him. He had no idea how he was tormenting me,

when he would give me no information beyond the bald fact that they were to be there. No one would have been more sorry than he, if——"

"Never mind him; I can imagine it all. You and he got quite affectionate after your tea, with papa pretending to be asleep on the other side of the fire, and watching you like a cat all the time!"

"He was not!"

Lily laughed. "Dear me! if he did, I daresay there was nothing to see. Mr Smith's courtship would not be very edifying. However, if it will make you come quicker to the point, I may tell you that that was a put in of my own. He was as sound as a top, and I'm sure I should have been the same, with only you two old humdrums grunting away into each other's ears all afternoon. Now for the Colonel; he is much more interesting."

"He is nothing of the kind," said Helen, warmly. "I should never compare the two men."

"Oh, come, that's going too far. One old, the other young——"

"Both exactly of an age, if you please; or rather, I believe Colonel Aytoun to be the elder of the two. Do you know what Mr Smith's age is?"

"Not in the least. I thought it safest not to inquire into it too minutely."

"He is barely fifty. He was forty-nine when he first came here."

"I thought he was about that. Is not that old?"

"Not what any people, except school-girls, call old. Of course, one would not say he was young; but except for the little bunch of grey on his temples, he has nothing old about him."

"Except his waistcoat."

"I have seen many men of twenty as stout as he. He has no stomach. If there is one thing worse than another, it is a thin man sticking out in front."

"I know," said Lily, laughing; "I grant you that. No, he has not a bad figure, but it is a middle-aged figure. It is not the figure of a young man, even though he were twenty stone. However, you are quite right to stand up for him, and I hope you always will. Just tell me now, like a good creature, you did think to-day he was very, *very* friendly, did you not?"

"Well, yes," said Helen, half smiling, half frowning; "I did."

"But he did not say anything?"

"No, *no*, NO! How often am I to tell you that? Nothing such as you expect, at all events. Something there was, between jest and earnest, a little bit of romance——"

"Nelly, if he gets to romance, he is done for."

"So you think; but I may be done for in another way first. Colonel Aytoun's coming has spoilt all."

"Why? He need never know anything about this. Perhaps they may never meet."

"Is that likely when they are old friends? I do wonder that they should be friends at all, by the by. Why, the way in which it came out that he knew them showed them to be most intimate. It was about the cat. That very cat that sat on my knee this afternoon was the one I used to see creeping into Mrs Aytoun's room in the Abbey."

"You were not so fond of it then."

"I might never have noticed it at all, but for Colonel Aytoun's being so angry once because it broke something, and he called it 'Mrs Aytoun's cat,' and made such a fuss that it was quite ridiculous. I took the cat's part, to tease him, and we had a mock quarrel; and that was how I remembered the creature. At least, I recollected what it was like,

though I *was* surprised when Mr Smith said it was the same."

"Do you think Mr Smith had heard anything of your flirtation?"

"Not yet; of that I am perfectly sure. But I think he looked a little taken aback at our having stayed there. It is no secret, the way that man behaves to his wife, and there is no doubt people don't care to go to the house."

"Then there is no reason why he ever should hear," said Lily, pursuing her own thoughts. "The whole thing is over and done with. Every one has forgotten it."

"Colonel Aytoun has not, I suspect. I do think he still likes me well enough to dislike the idea of my marrying any one else. He has tried often to make me renew our acquaintance, but that I never will do."

"You have not told me much, after all. Is there anything more?"

"Yes."

"Go on, then."

"I do hate the thought of it so much. It happened the evening before we came away. I was

passing his study, a little room off the stairs, and he called to me from the inside to come in. He was standing by the window, for it was getting dark, and he wanted the light, as he was examining something in his hand. I went in at once, and he said he had got a present for me, though not much of one; however, such as it was, I must wear it for his sake. For *his* sake! I did not say a word, for I did not quite like this. It had been all sentiment, and sympathy, and congeniality before, and I thought this was different. But I could not say 'No;' so he fastened it round my waist, and then, quite suddenly, he began to talk, to whisper in the wildest way about—oh, well, you can fancy the sort of things a man would say when once he allows himself to say anything."

"Nelly!"

Helen flung herself back in her chair. "Oh dear, my eyes *were* opened then! I stared so at him that it absolutely made him stop. For a moment I had the best of it. Then he had the insolence to beg me not to *pretend!* I must know all about it; and he seized my hand, and began calling me by my name, and——"

"And what?"

"Oh, I never was more thankful than to hear papa's step on the stairs outside! I actually wrenched myself out of his arms, for he was still by way of fastening the buckle, and turned to rush away. And then, oh Lily! as if anything ever was more cruelly unfortunate, out flew from my frock, here, a copy of verses he had given me in the morning. There was nothing much in them; but they were flattering, and rather pretty. 'To Helen's Eyes,' I think it was Just the sort of little effusion that any one might make, and no harm done. And I had treasured this up. Oh, you should have seen the look upon his face when he gave it to me, with a little bow, and a smile like—like a devil!"

"And what did you do?" said her sister, drawing a breath.

"The worst, worst thing I could have done. I have gone over that scene again and again in my mind, and anything would have been better than what I did. I saw, of course, what he must think—what nobody could have helped thinking—and there seemed to be no spirit left in me. The tears *would* come."

"Oh Nelly, did you cry?"

"I could cry now. That he should be able to suppose I had loved a man like him! and no doubt he really in his heart believes this still. I daresay he blames his precipitation, and thinks I was shocked and vexed; but no doubt he plumes himself that the deed was done. Is it not dreadful? I forgot the dagger, and went away as best I could; and he let me go quietly, for he thought he could make it all smooth next day. I think he reckoned on the night I should have, but he did not know how it would leave me in the morning. At breakfast he met us with his usual cool command not to go. We had been talking about it the evening before, but he could not possibly spare us; and he was sure Miss Tolleton, at least, would not desert him. I looked him full in the face, and told him he was mistaken. That is the only part of my visit to the Abbey I can look back upon with anything but shame. That moment I *like* to think of. His cheek flushed up, and such a savage look came into his face that I longed to say it over again. I never felt such rage in my life as I did then. Papa did whatever I bid him, and we left directly. He, Colonel Aytoun,

seemed as if he could hardly believe his eyes. He met me on the stairs, and began in his softest tones, 'And are you *really* in earnest?' and was going on, when I stopped him by calling to papa to come and say 'good-bye.' And 'good-bye' we said, with all decency, for the servants were looking on, and besides, it was better—and then we got into the carriage. I had written to the town for one early in the morning, that we might not be dependent on his. He would have said the horses were lame, or made some other excuse; so papa took a line himself, and found a boy, and sent it off, without anybody's knowledge. Papa was very good and kind about it all."

"But how could you be so foolish about the verses?"

"Foolish! How should I imagine things would turn out so?"

"I mean, how could you *care* to keep them there?"

"Pshaw! It was the merest piece of sentiment."

"That sort of sentiment I cannot imagine. It was very nice to get them, and nice to keep them; but as for wearing them!"

"Think what a child I was. It seemed so fine and romantic to me, that I never dreamt of anything

more. My head was turned with reading novels, and I wanted to be a heroine myself, and this came in my way. He took the exact measure of me so far, but he checkmated himself."

"But you kept the dagger?"

"What could I do with it? I could not leave it in my room, for the maids to make a story of; and I was resolved not to speak to him. I meant to throw it away; but—well, I am ashamed to say I have worn it sometimes, as you know, when the visit began to grow dim in my memory; and there never was any one who knew about it to see. Not that I ever mean to wear it again."

"And what are you afraid of now?" said Lily, thoughtfully. "Do you think he wants to see you again?"

"Yes, I do, indeed. I think, when he was at the opera that night, when we pretended not to see him, and he stared at us the whole time, he had a renewal of his old feelings. You know, Charley Hill asked who he was; and even Uncle Robert noticed his fixed look at our box."

"I wonder, then, that he has not been down here before now."

"How can we tell what may have kept him? He is here now, at all events. Oh dear!" with a sigh, "I wish I knew how long they would stay. I shall never breathe freely till they are gone. If one could only have a little illness!"

"And Mrs Hunt?"

"What of her? She is all smiles now. You know, if it *is* either of them, it is Maria!"

"I suppose after that night at the Hill there can be no doubt, not even an 'If it *is!*'" cried Lily. "Oh, Nelly, it was really cruel the way you played into that poor girl's hands!"

"Not into hers—into her mother's. It might be cruel, but it was necessary. I cannot possibly have Mrs Hunt's long nose being poked after me at every turn. I shall have enough to do with Colonel Aytoun."

"Do you think he will come to this house?"

"Oh yes, I am sure he will. But Corker must have strict orders that we are not at home, and we must really *be* not at home. He has the most extraordinary way of finding out things. If we were in the drawing-room, and he was denied admittance, he would ferret his way in, somehow or other."

"But if we go out we shall meet him."

"You and Carry may. He does not know you, and could not speak to you. I shall keep to the plantation. Or if I am at home, I could go to my room, and lock the door."

"What if papa meets him?"

"He will do very well. Colonel Aytoun knows he never liked him."

"But he will show surprise, and be taken off his guard."

"Let him show surprise—*that* does not matter."

"I think you had better tell him they are here. In the flurry of meeting, he would probably ask him to dinner."

"He might. You are right. I shall tell him to-morrow—and Carry too."

A pause, while each sister laid down her brush, and began to plait her long hair for the night.

"I think," said Lily, suddenly, "that it would be well to see as little as possible of Mr Smith while they are here."

"Yes."

"What a pity, Nelly, that he did not embrace his opportunity to-day!"

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"You still expect that? I wish I could make you understand that——"

"Oh, I understand; I understand it all perfectly. But one thing, just tell me one thing, and I will ask no more."

"What is it?"

"If he did—did *it*, you know—would you say 'yes'?"

Helen was about to put her off with a jest as heretofore, but something in Lily's face checked her.

She had made up her mind by this time, and, after a minute's thought, told her sister what it was.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOOR-BELL.

NEXT morning Helen tapped at the door of her father's room, and remained closeted with him some minutes before coming down to breakfast.

It was necessary that he should be told something of the business in hand.

He had his part to play, and when he knew what it was, would play it. She had to show him what it was.

Carry also had to receive instructions. Lily read her her lesson, and ended by saying the siege had begun.

At first the siege was not unpleasant. Enough snow had fallen to render the lanes impassable, and the more frequented roads were ankle-deep in mud and slush. Had there been no reason for staying at home, there would still have been no inducement to go out.

One day, however, finer than the rest, tempted the younger ones; and Helen, fretting for intelligence, advocated their walking to the village, and if nothing better offered, calling at least, on Mrs Hunt.

Nothing better did offer, and Mrs Hunt was found at home. Thus much they gained from her—Mr Smith was still confined to the house, and Maria in bed with a cough. "A sympathetic cough," Lily had suggested, and had got a benign look, a tap on the arm, and an admonition not to say such things.

They had nothing else to report. No one from the Castle had been visible anywhere, except, yes, a footman hurrying down with late letters for the post. The footman had touched his hat, but naturally had not volunteered any information.

"Why did you leave the front door open?" said Helen, who had come down from her room. "It always makes a draught in here."

"Don't shut it; it is for papa. He will be in in a few minutes. We left it unfastened when we went out, that we might slip in without Corker's knowing, and I told him to do the same."

"But you need not have left it so wide."

"If he didn't see it open, he would forget. It

cannot matter for these few minutes. He will be here directly."

Helen yawned, and returned to her book. She had drawn an arm-chair on one side of the fire, and, with her feet on the fender, was having a cosy afternoon of it.

Carry sat wearily down opposite, complaining that she was tired, and her feet wet. She began to unbutton her boots. "Lily, will you ring, and I'll get Thomson to bring me down dry shoes and stockings."

"Why can't you go up yourself? Corker will be coming with tea, and it makes such a fuss," said Lily.

"Never mind, then; I'll take them off, and wait till it is time to dress."

So saying she drew off one, and complaining that even the stocking was soaked, was about to disencumber herself of it also, when her sister started forward in her chair, exclaiming, "Who was that?"

"Papa," said Lily, faintly.

"It *was not*," said Helen. "It was he!"

Lily flew to the door. "I can stop Corker."

But even before she had time to turn the handle, her face changed. "Oh, Nelly, the front door."

"Yes," said Helen, quietly, as the bell at that instant rang with a loud peal. "It is too late. Sit still, and neither of you leave the room."

"I am so sorry," whispered Lily.

Her sister nodded; she was not angry—she was gathering all her wits about her for the interview.

Steps were heard outside. "Oh, I can't get on this boot!" gasped the poor sloven, tearing off the tag as she spoke, with a face of fire. "What shall I do? Lily!"

Lily turned, seized the boot, and thrust it under the sofa. She had not time for more than the muffled command, "Sit still, and it will never be seen." Then the door opened, and when Colonel Aytoun was announced, all three calmly raised their heads and looked at him, as if only half roused from their engrossing occupations.

He had been told the ladies were not at home, but he knew better. He had had the audacity to tell the man he was mistaken, for the ladies had just returned, and the open door attested to the truth of his observation. Corker was defeated. He supposed it was all right, and Colonel Aytoun was ushered into the drawing-room.

There they were. He thought he had caught them. He expected to see an instantaneous flutter, an astonishment, an agitation.

Never was man more outwitted by woman.

Miss Tolleton, indeed, allowed a slow surprise to gather in her face, but it was a surprise so full of indifference as to bear no flattering interpretation. The next instant she feigned to recollect herself, to be trying to appear pleased for the sake of politeness; and to be anxious to be civil, while in reality she was bored. Bored was exactly the word; not nervous, not angry, not startled, and not afraid—yet not delighted.

It was a bore to get out of her comfortable lounge, and be interrupted in the third volume of her novel; to have to sit up and make small talk, and simper, and smirk; and all for a man she had almost forgotten.

Such was the impression she meant to give, and she gave it.

Nevertheless, her sisters were brought forward, her father's absence regretted, his appearance promised, and Colonel Aytoun begged to come a little nearer the fire, with a perfectly good grace. Civil

inquiries were next made for Mrs Aytoun, followed by the usual appropriate felicitations on her improved health. In his turn the visitor had to go through preliminaries; but when he had observed that there was no need to ask how she was, since his eyes could tell him, and that he had hoped to have met her at the Castle, and that there was a large party staying there, he found some difficulty in going on.

Accordingly Lily entered the lists.

Was not the snow dreadful? And the thermometer going down so that she was certain it must freeze directly. They were in despair about skating. Did he think there was any chance of its keeping clear for skating?

Yes, Colonel Aytoun thought there was a very good chance; in fact, every prospect of it. Had they any good skating-ground in the neighbourhood?

On this point there was a great deal to be said. They had meadows which, when flooded deep enough, made the best skating-ground that could be imagined. During some winters they had been flooded for miles. Other seasons they had not been so fortunate. The most provoking thing was, when the frost came

too soon, and they were rough with weeds and grass. If only a sharp frost would set in at once, without any more snow, the meadows would be in perfection.

Colonel Aytoun, however, had not come there to talk to Lily about skating.

Having heard her out, he politely carried on the topic, while introducing another, and returned to her sister. "You used to be fonder of fishing than skating."

"I? I have not fished since I was a child."

"Have you forgotten the Abbey?"

"I was a child then, Colonel Aytoun, in everything but wearing short frocks."

In the haughty flush which gathered on her cheek, his eye could detect no sign of faltering.

"It seems to me," he said, "like yesterday."

"It seems to me like another life."

"What are you talking about, Helen?" inquired her sister, innocently. "It makes you sound quite old."

"Yes, I daresay; it makes me feel so. A visit that I paid when you were at school, Lily, and I ought to have been there too. It was the first time I had ever stayed anywhere in my life, and I daresay

Mrs Aytoun thought me a dreadful girl, for I had no idea how to behave myself."

"I am not aware that my wife had very much of your society," said Colonel Aytoun, drily. "That pleasure was reserved for me."

"If it was a pleasure, which is rather doubtful. Having an ignorant school-girl to drag about, is not usually thought much of a pleasure. But Mrs Aytoun—surely I remember now—she was very unwell all the time, and we were left for you to entertain. How you must have anathematised us! But you were very kind."

"And so were you," significantly, emphatically.

Helen gave him a vacant look, an unmeaning smile. He was talking polite humbug.

Her sister spoke again. "She was a regular romp then, was she not? She is always telling us of the odd things she used to do, and the scrapes she got into. It is too bad that she should be so particular with Carry and me, when every one laughs at the way she used to go on herself."

Helen laughed a little too, gently. "You absurd child, no one would ever think you were kept

much in order. I am sure I don't get credit for being half strict enough."

"Are you, then, so much changed?" said Colonel Aytoun.

"It is to be hoped so, at least, with two younger sisters to set an example to."

"A valuable example, no doubt."

"So my flatterers tell me," carelessly.

"Do you reckon me a flatterer?"

"I really never thought about it."

He bit his lip. The insolence of the girl! What! Did she talk to him like this? Did she dare to assume airs to him, as if he were an old man, and she just come to her womanhood?

Was it not barely four years since he had held her in his power, and made her a very puppet in his hands? Enthralled her so completely as to make him confident there were no bounds to what she would do for him. What had wrought this inconceivable change? He thought she had been merely a little mortified, a little chagrined. She had gone off in a passion, and he had given the pretty vixen time to cool.

Until now he had never been able to come after her; but, on coming, he had meant at once to resume his sway.

This was his reception. He was, like Samson, shorn of his strength; no longer terrible, no longer able to inspire either love or hatred. He read in her face the unaffected truth—at least, he thought he did.

"It appears, then," said he, bitterly, "that you have no memory for old friends.

"Indeed I have. The rest of my father's friends don't tell me so, I assure you."

"Am I considered one of your father's friends?" Stinging, mortifying, intolerable thought.

"Well, I hope so" (smiling). "I have always thought you one, I am sure. Pray, don't declare yourself his enemy. Or if you do, wait, at least, till we have time to warn him, for he is just coming in, and must have time to put on his battle array."

Colonel Aytoun's temper was fast rising. How could he keep from showing it? How should he be expected to smile and dissemble, and stab like a woman? What match was he for a Helen, aided by a Lily?

"I suppose I ought not to have looked for recognition at all!" said he, at last, with an angry laugh.

"Oh yes—you. How can you say that? But, to tell the truth, I should not have been surprised if you had failed to recognise me. Had our meeting been accidental, of course. At least, you would have taken my youngest sister for me."

"I am often taken for Helen," chimed in Lily.

Colonel Aytoun looked at her with contempt. He would not answer.

At this moment another loud ring of the door-bell made the hearts of all three sisters jump.

Brave and quick-witted as she was, the blood rushed to Helen's face, and oh, she knew he saw it!

Next moment brought an intense relief, for in walked, not Mr Smith, but Captain Wellwood.

She could draw breath again. Philip was bad enough, to be sure, but it might have been infinitely worse.

She could no longer pretend as she had pretended. That stupid blush had undone her. She had given Colonel Aytoun the cue. He had not been outgrown, but supplanted.

This, at all events, was how she knew he would interpret her start.

That the supplanter should be supposed to be Philip Wellwood, and not Mr Smith, was a great deal; but she wished—oh, she wished so much!—that there had been no question of either.

The surprise of both gentlemen was unfeigned. They had shot together in the morning, and hated each other cordially. Philip had the best grounds for his dislike. He hated Colonel Aytoun for the same reasons that every one else did; while Colonel Aytoun merely hated him for the same reasons that he hated every one else.

To descend to particulars, Colonel Aytoun had taken the best shots, and then told stories about them; whereas Captain Wellwood had merely brought home the heaviest bag.

Not a word had been said by either about the Miss Tolletons. Not a word of any projected visit to them. And each, accordingly, felt duly enraged at seeing the other. Each considered his manor was being poached upon.

"Ah, Colonel, I had no idea of finding you here." Thus much Captain Wellwood could say, without

expressing disgust. But the Colonel turned his back. That was her fellow, then.

Heavily dragged the visit now.

Neither visitor would open his lips to any but the eldest sister. Each listened to every word the other said. Each was doing his outside to discover the extent of the other's intimacy. Both were fixed in an equal resolve, not to be the one to leave first.

All this even the slowly comprehending Carry could perceive.

She had sat absolutely silent since the beginning of the visit; after drawing her chair in front of the opening through which her boot had disappeared.

On Captain Wellwood's taking a seat a little behind, she had reflected with agony that it might have been thrown too far, according to Lily's usual strong way of doing things. But discovering, by the appearance of half an inch of black cord on her side of the sofa, that such had not been the case, she had again given herself up to listening and observing.

She was now looking anxiously at Helen.

Helen had made several dumb signs, which she understood to mean that their father was wanted. The unfortunate complication of her boot had been

forgotten, and she was to fetch him. But this in her short walking-dress it was impossible she should do.

Glad as she would have been to leave the room, and take off the rest of her wet things, she could not, situated as she was, move without exposure. Helen's signals were dreadful to her. Only on one occasion had she braved them before, and that was all past and forgiven. She had returned to her allegiance.

Why would Helen not understand? She coughed, and looked expressively at Colonel Aytoun's boots. She remarked, opening her lips for the first time, how very wet they had got when walking. She tried Lily.

All in vain. Helen could stand it no longer. In her heart she was calling her sister a stupid dolt, or some such ugly name; but aloud, she gently suggested that Carry should let papa know.

She did not wish to say it. She was particularly anxious that it should not appear as if she stood in need of him. But the desire for his presence was so strong that have him she must, and Lily she could not spare to be her messenger. Colonel Aytoun would be at her side in a minute, in spite of Philip.

Philip was at a little distance, and so was Carry; and though, as yet, they had not gone into a fresh conspiracy, they might at any moment. In that case she would be, to all intents and purposes, alone with Colonel Aytoun.

This she was resolved against, and held Lily to her side with a grasp of iron.

Lily herself understood perfectly why she was not to go. She was proud of her sister's confidence, and of her position as right hand and support. Both were enraged with Carry, when, in reply to Helen's suggestion, she astounded them by asserting that she was tired, and thought there was no use in going for their father, as she was sure he had not come in.

Miss Tolleton rang the bell without a word, and then it appeared there were to be more blunderers than one.

Corker was but mortal, and though possessed of acute reasoning powers, he reasoned, as the best of mortals do, from analogy. He had seen gentlemen, and gentlemen in that house meant tea. All his former experience in the family had taught him that afternoon gentlemen and afternoon tea went together. Accordingly the drawing-room bell found him pre-

pared. As soon as it rang, he poured in the boiling water, and brought up the tray.

Muffins were there too, and a hot cake, spicy and odorous. There was even a more brilliant shine on the silver than usual, as it happened to have been his afternoon for cleaning it.

No words can express the disgust of Helen at this apparition.

If Mr Smith should come in now, she felt as if she should have to give him up altogether. Yet she must show nothing.

Corker was ordered to let his master know who was there, and tea was dispensed by the joint agency of the eldest and youngest sister.

By this time Colonel Aytoun had begun to doubt the accuracy of his first hasty conclusion. He could not detect any understanding between Helen and the new-comer. She was still preoccupied, more preoccupied than she had been before the interruption, but he had clearly no interest in her thoughts. They were both absent, yet alert. Both appeared to be on the watch, but neither to be watching the other. He turned his chair the least bit round, and growled a civil remark to Captain Wellwood.

Philip thought it was the dreariest tea he had ever known at Freelands. At the last he had been a good deal amused, and a little put out; but on the whole it was cheerfulness itself compared with this. For years after, the smell of hot cake gave him a sensation of something disagreeable.

What was that blackguard doing there? What would Sauffrenden think of it? What would they all? Colonel Aytoun, who was barely tolerated in the house because of his wife, was shunned by the whole party. The poor *T's* would be in deeper disgrace than ever.

Were it only Sauffrenden himself, he might be talked over; but the Fultons, Mr Smith, and others, were coming to dinner that evening, and if Colonel Aytoun told where he had been, they would all know what to think. Of course he would tell. He would have no reason for reticence on the subject. And he would talk about poor Helen, and get her more abused than ever. And Mr Smith would hear. Then in spite of himself, when Mr Smith recurred to his recollection, he smiled in Carry's face. She thought she had said something amusing, and laughed.

Her danger was over now, and she had nothing further to fear.

Mr Tolleton did not appear for fully ten minutes. He would have given something not to come in at all. He knew who was there quite well. He had known it all along—having crept past the drawing-room door on his stocking-soles directly after Colonel Aytoun had been ushered within.

He had not known a minute's peace, for fear he should be sent for, until Captain Wellwood came. Then he had settled himself down with an easy mind, and begun to change his things for the evening.

Helen's summons was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. But he knew, when he got it, that he must go. And unwillingly, after delaying as long as he could, he went.

It certainly did not appear as if he were wanted. Scarcely had he shaken hands, when the first visitor rose to go.

He appealed to Philip, and Philip thought it best to accede. He could do no good by remaining, and he wished to hear if the call would be acknowledged on their return to the Castle.

With a sigh of relief, the others saw them depart.

Helen set her lips together as the door shut.

"Now," said she, "*that*, I hope, will never happen again."

"Well," said her sister, "I thought we managed wonderfully well."

"Did you, my dear?" inquired her father, with unwonted tenderness in his voice. "Did *you*, Helen? I knew I should only make a mess of it, if I came in; so I stayed away till you sent for me. But I am afraid my coming did no good."

"The greatest good it could have done, papa, by sending them away. But, Carry, how could you not go when I told you to go for papa? And you saw I wanted it long before I spoke, too. I particularly wished not to speak. I showed you as plainly as possible; but you are such a——"

"How could *you* not remember my boot?" cried the outraged Carry, interrupting. "As if I could possibly have got up and walked across the room with only one boot on, and not even a long gown! I never felt so uncomfortable in my life! You might have known I should never have refused

without a reason for it, and not have asked me out before them all!"

"I declare, I forgot all about your boot," said Helen, who had now the worst of it. "That comes of your untidy ways. I suppose you could not help it, however; but why did you not give me the hint?"

"I did. I gave you a hundred hints, but you would not take them. I stared at Colonel Aytoun's boots, till he thought there was something the matter with them, and kept peeping down himself. And I said how wet we had got, and——"

"Never mind! never mind!" cried her father, impatiently. "What is all this about boots? What does it signify what Colonel Aytoun's boots were? He never had good ones, because he would go to Wilson's. Wilson can't make boots. But what I want to know is, how you managed—how you did with him—eh, Helen?"

"Oh, quite as well as could have been expected, papa; but he is not a nice man to have to deal with. I wish with all my heart we had never met him."

"Did he—eh? I suppose he reverted—eh? Was there anything unpleasant?"

"Well, we had a good deal that was not pleasant, certainly; but on the whole we had by far the best of it. I affected to have been such a child at the Abbey, that he, and it too, had almost passed from my memory."

"My dear! in four years!"

"Four years means a long time to a girl, papa. Besides, of course, it was a pretence, and he saw through it; but it was the only thing that stopped him. I brought it to bear at every turn. I think if I had tried, I could not have hit on anything that would have hurt his vanity more; and I did like that. Oh, that door-bell! I thought, of course, it was Mr Smith!"

"So did I!" exclaimed the other two, simultaneously.

"I never was so glad to see Philip before."

"Philip was the angel of light this time," said Lily, laughing. "And as for Colonel Aytoun, he might have been a study for *his* portrait. An angel of darkness himself could not have given a better scowl than the one with which he saluted Philip."

"I am sure Philip gave it him back again," said

Carry, who had seen wonders from her post of observation.

"Well, the danger is over for this time," said Helen, with another sigh. "But mind, Lily, while he is here, you never leave the hall-door open again."

CHAPTER XX.

BEND, STURDY OAK!

It would have been difficult for Helen to say why she talked of the danger; or perhaps we ought to say, why she talked of it as being over.

Colonel Aytoun was no longer dangerous to her in the way of attraction, and if he attempted reproaches, would get as good as he gave.

If the danger lay in his mischief-making between her and Mr Smith, it was assuredly not over. He had escaped meeting him at Freelands, it is true, but he would meet him elsewhere—at Sauffrenden, perhaps; and then, if they were spoken about, it was very probable that he might find out everything. She little knew how unlikely it was that they should be spoken about at Sauffrenden.

But the truth was, Helen hardly knew what she was saying. The repulsion with which Colonel Ay-

toun's presence now inspired her was so great that she could scarcely bear it. The touch of his hand chilled her. To catch his eye made her shrink. The recollection of the evil he had done her, the evil he had meant to do her, and the evil he would now do her if he could, made even his being in the neighbourhood overcloud her whole sky. She could not despise what she so much detested, but she did marvel that she could ever have admired Colonel Aytoun.

His person had grown older; and the savage temper which blandishments could hardly hide at any time, was now stamped upon his face.

His manner to herself, too, how shameful, how degrading! The mocking voice which had called her a valuable example, and the sneer which underlay the assertion that she had been kind to him.

It is a dreadful thing for a woman, with any womanly feeling, to see herself not respected; and there was not common respect, nor the commonest appearance of it, in Colonel Aytoun's manner.

When he grew angry he had taunted her. When his taunts apparently fell harmless, he had only grown more unscrupulous in making use of them.

It was very well for her to say, and with truth, to her father and sisters, that she had the best of it. It was a triumph she would fain have been spared. It was one of those victories in which the bloodshed is greatest on the conqueror's side.

In her earlier days, the days of her hoydenhood, it might not have been felt to this extent. She might even have considered such a war of wits an amusing pastime; and instead of contenting herself with defence, boldly carried the campaign into the enemy's country. In these wars she had invariably the best of it, as Mrs Hunt and many others knew to their cost. But a hand-to-hand fight with Colonel Aytoun was different. His touch was pollution—his presence a defiling thing. When she was rid of him, she might be excused if, hardly knowing what she said, she called it the "danger."

The sisters were now necessarily condemned either to the house or to their own grounds, which were not extensive.

To be sure there was the short cut; but by frequenting it, reports might get abroad of an understanding between them and Mr Smith. Everything that would encourage these must be given up for a

while. They even hoped he would not come to Freelands.

Carry and Lily, having seen Colonel Aytoun, were almost as anxious as their sister to avoid another meeting. They never should know how to answer him as Helen did, and agreed that he had a horrid smile, and a malevolent eye. Besides which, he had paid them no attention, and had looked older than they expected.

"I told you that," said Helen. "He is fifty if he is a day. I rather suspect he is a year or two older."

"But I did not think he would look it. I imagined a tall, dark, melancholy-looking man, a sort of Don Juan."

"You could not have hit him off better, Lily."

"Oh no, he is not my ideal at all."

"So that is your ideal?"

"Yes, quite. To tell you the truth, I had rather prepared my mind to be captivated with your *bête noire*."

"Captivated!"

"Well, I'm not; so you need not look like that. For one thing he stooped, and his eyebrows were too thick; but the worst was, I am certain he had false

teeth. I heard them rattle in his mouth—I know I did; and after that, I could have snapped my fingers at him."

"You had better not, Lily."

"Oh, I shall do nothing rash; I did not mean that. Only that I did wonder how you could ever have cared to go on with a man of that age."

"I am not particular as to age. For that matter, older men are often far more dangerous than the very young ones. *They* are so soft. Just like the young trees, tender and sappy, the least thing kills them. But I like to say, 'Bend, sturdy oak!'" cried the saucy girl, in her triumph.

"It was a good thing that fancy took you just when Mr Smith came," rejoined Lily. "You are bending him, or I am mistaken."

"And it takes all my strength, and that is what I like. He gives way a little, inclines on one side; I think I will have him down, and lo! he is upright again with a spring."

"Every stroke tells, however," said Lily, carrying on the metaphor.

Helen smiled. "I think he is beginning to show signs of wear. The resistance is getting feebler.

Courage, Helen! 'One struggle more'—how does it go on?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Lily; "that is not the meaning at all. But I like your oak. I don't know why it should be, but I like him better after to-day. He rises by comparison with Colonel Aytoun. At least there is nothing false about him, and he has such a much pleasanter voice."

Helen was very much pleased. A concession so great as this could hardly have been looked for from the volatile Lily. She slipped her arm within her sister's, and began to talk of Mr Smith more seriously than she had ever done before.

"You see, Lily, I really do like him. He is very pleasant. He is as kind as he can be. He would allow me to have my own way in everything, and we should have such fun up there. I am sure I should never feel the least inclined to do anything he disliked. I would be as good to him as possible. And his plans and his cottages—it is really very nice of him, and quite the right thing for a country gentleman. He gets on so well with everybody, too. Look how he got into the Sauffrendens' set at once, and the Lorrimers are his great friends; and these

Aytouns who ask nobody, they had him at the Abbey. They never have anybody there except girls to flirt with. But every one seems to like Mr Smith."

"Yes," Lily agreed, doubtfully; and barely remembered in time, not to add, "It is very strange," before her sister.

The truth of the statement she could not deny. But she felt it was a curious mystery, of which the most curious part was Nelly's own share in it.

But how charming it would be to feel really rich! They were very short of money just then at Freelands. The mourning for their grandmother had cost more than she left them; and though, to do the girls justice, they made their funds go further than many would, the bills were heavy.

Their income was not large; Mr Tolleton's fortune being invested so that it yielded only a small though safe return. It was tied up for his daughters. He was not at liberty to touch it, or alter its disposal.

The spacious mansion of the Hill, with its air of wealthy luxurious calm, had greatly impressed Helen. She was not a foolish girl, and where money was not to be had, contrived to do without it. She had never

run into debt, and kept her sisters out of it likewise. But she dearly loved the things which money could purchase. Her very abstemiousness at present gave her a double zest for them.

She longed to go out into the world; to see, and be seen; to travel, in pretty travelling dresses, from one fashionable spot to the other. Further, she desired adventure, she panted after freedom and emancipation. Mr Smith's having shown a roving taste had been two-thirds in his favour.

Then, when at home, she had a fancy for bright little pony-carriages, and a supple hunter to carry her out, the admiration of the field. Of course, as Mr Smith did not hunt, she could not follow the hounds either. That prospect must be relinquished; but she would be able to dally round the meet, to show herself at the breakfast, to get snatches of the sport by many a little turn and by-path.

All this, if need be, she could go without. Had she not been the one to insist on laying down the carriage, when, the winter before, one horse had died and the other had been obliged to be shot?

People had almost pitied the Tolletons then.

But the girls made so light of their misfortune,

and looked so healthy and handsome walking about in their bright-coloured petticoats, that the pity died out.

They were known to be fond of riding, but no one ever offered them a mount. They walked when they went to make their calls. They walked to church in all weathers.

Lord Sauffrenden alone felt for them. Captain Wellwood, who trudged many a mile to save his own beautiful pair, saw no hardship in it. Mr Smith knew nothing of the matter. Dr Hunt thought it did them all the good in the world.

As the sisters talked confidentially over Helen's prospects, on that Christmas eve, they spoke of their loss.

"It would be a comfort to have a carriage again," said Lily. "I wonder how many Mr Smith has."

"I have seen two, and a gig, and I think there is a pony-carriage in the stables."

"How did you find out that?"

"I forget how. Not from himself; the Hunts, I think. By the way, I wonder if Maria is learning to drive yet. Oh, Lily, I always forgot to tell you of our visit to the Hunts the day of the snow-storm.

Colonel Aytoun put it out of my head. It was papa's idea. It was to make sure that the doctor had paid his visit. Now, what do you think is the new alarm? We are disposed of, but a formidable antagonist has arisen in the shape of Miss Fulton. Poor Miss Fulton! Imagine her feelings if she knew she was regarded as the rival of Maria Hunt! It appears, however, that Miss Fulton is the wife the Sauffrendens have looked out for Mr Smith, and beyond a doubt, the most suitable one that has been thought of yet. If it had not been for one single objection, she is the very person I should have fixed upon, myself."

"But I suppose," said Lily, slowly, "that there is nothing in it?"

"Do you wish to know what he thinks of her? She talks too loud, and too fast, and too much."

"She may talk him into marrying her, for all that."

Helen smiled proudly. "I don't think you would be afraid, if you had heard the rest. There was a very pretty distinction drawn between her and your dear sister. I do like Mr Smith. I like his way of saying things. I like the fun of having them all

after him, and knowing what I know, all the time. Not but what I exonerate Cornelia."

"Yes," said Lily; "she is too mad to do anything half so sane."

"It is the Admiral, of course. But there the Hunts were, all in a fever about it. What might be Miss Fulton's age? Had she not grown much older-looking lately? Was she not obliged to go about very shabby? Were not things at the Hall all gone to rack and ruin? This was all, as it were, in joke, you know. She would make an excellent wife for Mr Smith, would she not? If only he could fancy her. The misfortune was, that old bachelors never did take to sensible, experienced women; they fancied silly, frolicky girls, who would plague their lives out. Poor Miss Fulton! They hoped she was not building upon it. They heard she and the Admiral had been very assiduous. It would be a sad pity if she laid herself out to catch him, and so forth. You have no idea how absurd the whole scene was. I was treasuring up every word; and then, after all, it went out of my head."

"But what did you say?"

"Of course I gave the idea every encouragement;

that is to say, I affected to disbelieve every word of it. Nothing of the sort had ever reached our ears, and we should surely have heard if there had been any grounds for it. I imagined any danger to Mr Smith's heart lay *nearer home*. But, all the time, I took care they should have no real grounds for disbelief to rest on. We talked of nothing else the whole visit, for every time I said I was *sure* there was nothing, I laid such an emphasis on the *sure*, that it was quite enough to turn the scales. People don't say they are *sure* of things, unless they are not. Poor folks! What geese they did make of themselves! I think even Mr Smith would have thought it fair to show them up."

"He would have enjoyed it immensely."

"I don't know that he would."

"Why, he is not a prig, whatever he may be."

"Without being a prig, he is the most straightforward man I ever knew. If he ever should be anything to me, I mean to take a lesson from him how to behave myself better."

"I think the lessons have begun already, Nelly. You are always wondering what he would say to this

and that. Next time you are in difficulties, you had better go to him for advice."

It was spoken in jest, but her sister saw no jest in it. Had she had any difficulties to contend against, unconnected with the difficulty of marrying him, she would have asked his advice before that of any one else she knew. When in his society, she had that delightful sense of being regarded with favour, which dissipates fear. She felt invariably that he was conscious of her presence. Did she move from one chair to another—he was looking. Did she talk to others—he was listening. She was the one person in the room for him. Her conquest, so far, had been easy, but it was not yet complete. She thought of Colonel Aytoun, and felt it might never be completed.

CHAPTER XXI.

SKATING.

MANY days now passed in the same monotonous manner.

Christmas Day and New-Year's Day went by, and nothing occurred to stir up the people of East-world. If the party at Sauffrenden were having a merry time, none of their mirth, at any rate, extended itself beyond the Castle walls.

The Aytouns, if still there, must have paid a visit of at least a fortnight's duration, and it was reasonable to suppose it must be nearly at an end. So argued Lily Tolleton; and she enforced the certainty with all the weighty reasoning, which a hard frost and a glorious skating day could suggest.

It was too tiresome, this being shut out from the world. Why should they not break loose for once,

and all three adjourn to the meadows? Everybody would be there, and if Colonel Aytoun was, it could not be helped. But, at the same time, she was sure he would not. "Listen, Nelly. Ten days is a proper Christmas visit, and they have been there a fortnight. We know there is no love lost between them and the Sauffrendens, and it is most unlikely that the very first time they have come at all, they would stay long."

Helen was not equally certain of this. If Colonel Aytoun wished to stay, he would stay. He was no observer of etiquette. Then her sister put forth a still more forcible argument. He had never repeated his call at Freelands. Helen herself had been confident that if he remained in the neighbourhood he would be there again ere long.

She admitted the truth of this, and owned that as each day had closed in peace, she had breathed a sigh of relief. Still she would not go to the meadows, herself. If they liked to go, it was different. There might be no harm in that; and soon she had talked herself into the belief that there might even be good. She was growing hungry for news.

All the time they were dressing she gave instructions. They were, if possible, to avoid speaking to Colonel Aytoun, but to take every means of ascertaining whether he were on the ice or not. If not, to discover if he had quitted the neighbourhood. If they actually met face to face, they were to tell him (in answer, of course, only to inquiry) that she had a headache, and was confined to her own room.

If Mr Smith were on the meadows, they were to come across him by accident, but not to remain in his company more than a few minutes. "He will be easily skated away from!" interposed Lily.

"You had better not boast too soon," replied her sister. "He has spent winters in Holland on purpose to enjoy it."

She then resumed the leading-strings.

They were to go up to Miss Clay, and be very civil; and not forget to ask after Mrs Rodney and the baby—the baby was a girl.

With Philip Wellwood they might flirt as much as they pleased.

These were the chief instructions of the embassy. In addition, they were to keep their eyes and ears

open, to learn anything more that was to be learnt, either about the Hunts or Miss Fulton, and to note what guests were among the Castle party.

All these duties the sisters faithfully undertook to discharge, to the best of their ability, and set off in high spirits for the rendezvous.

Miss Tolleton then bolted herself into her room; and Corker received the usual intimation from the ladies, with their hats and cloaks on, that they were "not at home."

With this reply he went prepared to answer the door-bell about an hour after the house was quiet.

"Miss Tolleton is at home, I know," rejoined the inquirer—the same who had set aside his refusal of admittance, before. "Be so good as take her my card."

Without hesitation, the butler accepted the card. He was accustomed to this sort of thing. The drawing-room was empty, but he sent it up-stairs by a maid.

"I knew it!" said Helen, breathing heavily as the light tap came to her door. "He has come straight off here. Yes, I will come, Thompson."

Thompson presented the card.

"Tell him I am sorry, but I cannot see any one to-day. I am obliged to stay in my room, having a headache."

Would he go, or would he not? If not, he should have a plainer answer still; but she felt that if that light tap were to come again, she would not unbolt the door; it would be too unsafe.

Three or four minutes' suspense, then a rustle, and then it came.

"I cannot get up again, Thompson. What is it?"

"If you please, Miss," came a voice that was alternately a loud whisper and a low growl, "it's the gentleman saying he thought as how you would see him perhaps, as he came on business."

"No power on earth shall make me see him," said Helen to herself, her spirit rising. "I can't. I can not; and more than that, I will not. All along I felt this was coming. Thompson!"

"Yes, Miss; I am here."

"Go down and see the gentleman yourself, and tell him, without any more excuses, that I cannot see him. Just those words, and no more."

Another five minutes elapsed after the maid's

departure, and then the sound of footsteps beneath the window told that her second errand had sped.

Although the blind was down, the window was open, and Miss Tolleton wished her room had not looked to the front. She held her breath; so loud, so near, sounded the heavy tramp upon the gravel. In another minute she had crept to the window, and peered behind the screen. He was at the gate. She was just in time to see him close it, then stand a moment, and look steadfastly towards the house.

What was in his mind?

Carry and Lily came home full of gossip. Colonel Aytoun had accosted them on their very first appearance at the meadows. He had come across the ice, shaken hands with both, and immediately inquired after their sister. Lily had answered him according to all that Helen had said, and he had hardly waited to hear her out ere he started off along the road, bound, no doubt, for Freelands.

As Helen had vowed not to leave her room, and Corker had received instructions, it had not occasioned them the least anxiety; and they had even amused themselves by imagining the reception he

would have, as they watched his long back hurrying down the road.

Mr Smith had also asked after Miss Tolleton; but on hearing of her indisposition had merely expressed regret, and remained where he was.

"We fully expected to see him set off too," said Lily. "If there had been any more friends of yours on the ice, I should certainly have despatched them all up. Mr Smith was lukewarm, decidedly lukewarm, Nelly. He went on skating with the utmost composure. He performed the vine directly after, without a stumble."

"Do you mean that he was doing figures?" said Helen, with interest.

"Yes, indeed—a little stiffly, but still far better than any one else. There were no really good skaters there."

"Did you see nothing of Philip?"

"Only in the distance, going down a slide with Lord Sauffrenden, and all the boys in the village. Lord Sauffrenden got knocked down once or twice, and each time we heard Philip's great 'Haw! haw!' coming across the ice. You know his laugh. He only laughs about twice a-year, and then it is like thunder."

"He didn't come up to you?"

"No; he pretended not to see us. They were having great fun, and I don't think he wanted to be troubled. We skated several times round them."

"If I had been there," thought Helen, "I think he would have come."

"At last he walked off with Mr Smith," concluded Lily.

"Did he? Where could they be going? To the Hill?"

"Yes; I think so, at least. I heard Philip call out something about ten o'clock, and one of the men touched his hat. I suppose he has gone to dine there."

"And what about Miss Fulton?" inquired Helen.

Oh, Miss Fulton! Lily had a fund of information and merriment about Miss Fulton. The way she and the Admiral had borne down on Mr Smith, the way Mr Smith had sailed away from them, the way the Admiral had hobbled round on his gouty leg, and caught him up again; and best of all, the way Cornelia had joined with him, and smiled, and chatted, and pursued from point to point; yet doing it all in such evident innocence and unconsciousness, that it was a treat to watch her.

The Hunts, however, who were incapable of understanding such a happy state of mind, had been wild with jealousy. They too had tried to chase down Mr Smith, but not with equal success. Lily thought he had never even spoken to them, but Carry corrected her. He had; he had stayed with them about five minutes, but after that she was certain he had been keeping out of their way.

Mrs Hunt, with a fierce, anxious face, had hauled the two hither and thither, and kept them standing by the side till they must have been half frozen, but all to no end. They were still there when the Tolletons had left, the girls looking sulky and rather ashamed. Miss Clay had been left in their charge by her brother-in-law, and Mrs Hunt had appeared to be somewhat consoled by this attention, though Lily affirmed that even Maria and Clare looked respectable by the side of Miss Clay, who had got herself up a perfect fright.

The first rush of the incoming tide having now subsided, Helen was at liberty to dilate upon what had happened at home, which she did with animation.

The bell, the voices, the light tap at the door, were

graphically portrayed. The suspense between the first and second appearance of the maid, — the crunching footstep on the gravel—the look backwards from the gate,—all in turn were dwelt upon.

"Don't you think it was a pity to send so very plain a message?" said Lily, prudent for once.

"I knew it was at the time; but it was the only thing I could do. If I had had any other excuse—but, however, it was better to stick to one. No, the headache did very well. He ought not to have shown he did not believe in it. But it was just like him. He has no more idea of paying you the common ordinary respect of pretending to believe in what he is told, than—I am sure I don't know what."

"What do you think he will do now?"

"Nothing, if we can keep him at a distance. The only way is to defy boldly, when you are driven into a corner."

"I was so disappointed," said Carry, in her slow way. "I thought I heard him tell Miss Fulton that they were going on Saturday. I thought I should have that to tell. And she said she was so glad. 'So I'm sure am I!' I thought. But the next

moment it turned out to be not the Aytouns going, but the Lorrimers coming."

"You stupid!" said Helen, laughing. "How could you imagine she would tell Colonel Aytoun she was glad he was going?"

"Of course," said Carry, warmly, "I knew she ought not to say it, but she is so odd. I put it down to that."

"Carry would never have said it herself," said Lily, looking at her.

"Of course not," rejoined Carry again. "How could you ever think I should? I never say rude things like that. Nobody knows better than I what I am about, though you and Helen don't think so. I can answer better than either of you when I choose."

"It's a pity you don't choose oftener then," said Lily, drily.

CHAPTER XXII.

HE HAD GUESSED THE INDUCEMENT.

When Colonel Aytoun looked back after closing the gate at Freelands, he was not hurling imprecations on the head of its inhabitant, nor even vowing eternal vengeance. In these days such magnificent sensations are unusual.

But, nevertheless, there was working within his bosom a feeling, which with care might have been nursed into a very respectable thirst for revenge. He longed to pay her out. He had never been treated so in his life before. He said to himself that no woman had ever yet turned her back upon him.

Strange as this might seem if true, it was true after a fashion.

So short a time did he allow to elapse before his affections fell from warm to freezing-point, that it

was scarcely possible for any one to anticipate him.

On first acquaintance he was charming; and he never declined—he jumped from one extreme to the other. One day lying at a fair one's feet, the next walking off in another direction. But Helen had been an exception to this rule, from the beginning of his acquaintance with her. Her beauty had caught his eye. Her ready wit amused his fancy. And the freedom from restraint, and fearlessness of the world's criticism, which, joined to the ignorance of motherless seventeen, had made her ready to learn whatever he taught, and willing to obey whatever he ordered, had completed the charm.

He would mould her to his will. There were no bounds to what she would do for him. She must be his entirely.

That she had burst away from him in a rage was rather stimulating than otherwise. He had not wearied of her, and he had not done with her. He had brought his wife to Sauffrenden on purpose to pursue her, for the unhappy Emmeline was his only key of entrance there. She had been made to write and propose the visit; and when it was ac-

cepted he had grimly jested with her in the satisfaction of his heart.

To be met thus!

Looked at, spoken to, like a serpent deprived at once of its charm and its sting. And the end! Turned from the door, because, forsooth, his importunity was too troublesome, his company too insipid. Miss Tolleton was fatigued with admiration, his was altogether superfluous.

His vanity, however, would not long permit him to take this view of the case. It is difficult to sustain painful thoughts of ourselves for any length of time. Any other interpretation, any other solution of the enigma, would be welcome.

He thought of Philip. But the more he thought of him the more his conviction amounted to an instinct that he was not the man. Whoever it was, it was not he. That being the case, Philip might be made of use in discovering to him who it was.

He regretted that he had not cultivated Captain Wellwood's goodwill. A fellow who gave himself such confounded airs was not likely to be brought round in a hurry. He might be tried, but could not be depended upon.

On a sudden he recollected Sir George Lorrimer. Sir George was at present unknown to him, but he and Lady Lorrimer were expected at the Castle in a few days, and their acquaintance could be assiduously sought. Now that he was prepared beforehand he would use all his powers of ingratiation. It mattered not who or what sort of person he was; he would take colour by him, and attain the coveted information. Sir George, he was aware, had been in the neighbourhood before, and probably knew all about Miss Tolleton.

Lord Sauffrenden, before he went to the ice, sent his portmanteau to the station, intending to run up to London for a few days, and have, as he told his wife, a breath of fresh air, before inhaling more of his guest's society.

In his own house he said to himself he could not be bad to Colonel Aytoun; and though this being bad simply meant with him coming short of the veriest extreme of brotherly kindness, still it made him constrained and uncomfortable.

He was not enjoying his Christmas, and at last determined in cowardly fashion to run away from it.

As for Milly, she need have nothing to do with

Aytoun. If she and Emmeline and Mary Percy kept together there was no fear of their being molested. The obnoxious guest had gone through his usual stages with all three, although in the case of Lady Sauffrenden the preliminary stage had been very brief, for her being his wife's cousin and steady friend had developed the second prematurely.

But Milly cared not a jot for him.

As soon as her "Good morning" had been bowed across the breakfast-table, she ignored his existence for the rest of the day. She had nothing to be afraid of, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing in her life past and present which all the world might not pry into. What was Colonel Aytoun to her? A man she would not have had seen at her house but for poor dear Emmeline's sake.

Yes, Sauffrenden might go if he chose. If she had been in his place very likely she would have done the same; and she quite agreed with him as to the propriety of putting Rosamond off till after the Aytouns had left.

This was Lord Sauffrenden's business in town. He was to see his sister, and advise her to postpone her visit till they were free.

"I shall tell her that, of course; we can't turn them away as long as they choose to stay," said he; "though it's the last Christmas I shall catch myself having them here, spoiling our whole party. It has been a perfect marplot."

"Poor Emmy! I am glad for her sake, however," said Millicent, tenderly. "You have no idea how nice she is, Sauffrenden. And she seems quite a different creature when she is out alone with Mary and me. She laughs and talks, and gets such a colour. And then she comes down to dinner all cold and dead again, as if he had withered her up. Fancy what it must be to be alone with him! She said to me yesterday she did hope we could put up with them for a very little longer, she did not know when she had enjoyed herself so much. Those were her words."

"Poor thing! What a brute he is!"

"And you know, she tries to put a good face upon it. I think that is the most touching part," said the proud unemotional little Lady Sauffrenden, with a sudden break in her voice. "I can scarcely bear to hear her poor excuses, and see how she looks to find out if we are taken in by them. She never

complains. She talks about the Abbey as if everybody pictured it a happy home instead of a great prison. I wish you had heard her yesterday, finding out all sorts of reasons why she and I had seen so little of each other, and all the time the one reason as palpable as it could be to both of us."

"Has she any idea why they are staying on?"

"No. I suppose he likes it."

"Don't you tell her then!"

"Tell her? How can I? I don't know myself. What do you mean, Sauffrenden?" all eager and curious now. "What reason is there?"

"Nothing, nothing," shuffling uneasily in his chair.

"Oh, there is, and you know it; I see you do. How could you keep it from me? Come now, you must tell me now. You must, and there's no escape; you must, you must," flying round him, brush in hand. "I have you here, caught, and pinned into a corner. Come, there is no help for it. Now then."

And he had meant to be so discreet!

"I wish you wouldn't ask me, Milly; I may be all wrong. I know nothing about it. It's only Philip."

"Well, what about Philip? Philip is the very man for you; he acts pointer, and then you shoot."

"I can act pointer for myself," said he, offended. "I should hope I am as good as Philip any day. He never discovers half the things I do."

"Yes, yes—I know. Now then, tell me this. What has Philip penetrated into this time—for you have owned yourself this is his affair?"

"He didn't want it spoken about," groaned he.

"You need not be afraid. Who have I to speak to? I promise. There!"

"Oh, hang it! you are such a creature for finding things out!"

"Yes, yes, I am," cried she, with the glee of a child. "I have found out the half already, now for the rest."

There was no escape. Sitting in Milly's room by Milly's fire, in dressing-gown and slippers, how could he be anything but an easy prey?

He had done his best, and now gave in.

Philip's visit and Philip's surmises were unfolded; and however much the revelation might be softened by the veil of charity which the narrator endeavoured to throw over it, it was still startling. The

veil, stretched to its utmost limits, could not cover all; and while they were both agreed in sheltering Philip, they differed in the disposal of the rest. He would fain have hid the luckless *T.s*, while she was more willing, or rather less reluctant to screen Colonel Aytoun.

She disliked Emmeline's husband, it is true, but had no past love of him, no present dread of him, to swell her dislike into detestation.

He was all that was bad, she admitted, but one thing more or less matters little when a man is all that is bad; and the first flush of her wrath fell on the Tolletons.

"I knew they had stayed at the Abbey. Emmy told me. She would not even see them, Sauffrenden! She was in her room at the time, but not exactly ill, only kept quiet; and if it had been any one else she would have been only too glad to have had a little company. She was actually sending for her, when Egerton himself advised her not. At least, he spoke in such a way of her that it was quite enough. Yet they stayed nearly a month! Of course it was dreadful for Emmy."

"Of course it was. But all the same he took a

very easy way of keeping her out of his wife's room."

"Yes; any one could tell that was what he wanted. But she affected to think it was all on the lady's side. I suppose they wanted to be together, and contrived this plan."

"Or he contrived it."

"But no nice girl would have done it."

"Milly, I am not defending her. I never said she was a nice girl, but she was a mere child, and left all to herself."

"Her father was with her."

"You know what he is."

"I do not indeed; I know nothing about him."

"He is the most perfect nonentity. A man like Aytoun would twist him round his finger. I do think you are rather hard on those poor girls, Milly. I do indeed, dear."

This tone always brought Milly to her better mind.

"Do you think I am hard, you dear old fellow? You are so good and nice yourself—I love you all the better for it—but indeed you are too——at least I cannot see things exactly as you do. This Helen

Tolleton is no child now; she is at least as old as I am——"

"She is only twenty-one."

"Well, that is but a year younger; though how you came to know it I cannot imagine."

"Oh, I always know people's ages."

"Does Philip find them out for you too?"

"No indeed; it is I who find out for myself. What puts Philip into your head at every turn?"

"Only that I fancied he was very likely to know Miss Tolleton's age."

"That is a mistake, Milly. He doesn't care twopence about her. I have told you so over and over again. He thinks of them exactly as we do."

"But we do not think exactly alike."

Sauffrenden looked disturbed. "I'm sure we do, dear. We do not either of us like them; but I think, and so would you if you thought about it, that in good hands they might be made something of yet."

"But how are they to get into good hands?"

("Mr Smith's hands," thought he, "they could get into fast enough, if they only were let alone.")

"Now you see," pursued Milly, "here is this

Egerton finds them out at once. That won't enhance their good reputation."

"No. That is the way of the world, and more particularly the way of the women's world, my dear. A blackguardly fellow goes and calls. The girls are cold to him and snub him, and show him they wish to see his face no more. No harm is thought of *him*; but they—oh! it was shocking of *them!*"

"I should think it was harm enough of him that it should be thought shocking of them," said she, nettled.

"There you are—you always catch one up so. Now I bet you a sovereign they give him the cold shoulder next time he goes. Philip said he was certain from Helen's whole manner that she wished to have done with him."

"And what is the reason of this change of manner?"

"Just what I said. She was a mere child at the Abbey, and thought it was good fun to romp with him. Now, she knows better. I mean to go down to the meadows to-morrow, and watch what goes on."

Thus he had closed the conference, and prepared for himself a charming little entertainment at the same time.

So contrary, however, did things turn out on that occasion, that he prudently resolved to say nothing about it on his return from town, and trust to the subjects being forgotten.

He had seen Colonel Aytoun accost the sisters on their first appearance, and he and Philip had looked into each other's faces when immediately afterwards they descried him on the way to Freelands. *She* had remained at home, and he had gone to see her.

Determined not to be left alone after dinner with the obnoxious guest, and unable to run away like Sauffrenden, Philip had hit on the happy idea of Mr Smith, whom the Admiral had lately captured for the fourth time. He made in to the rescue, extracted the prey, and obtained as his reward the coveted invitation.

Lord Sauffrenden told one of his men to let the ladies know, and desired Captain Wellwood to name the hour he would be sent for.

"Why should he be sent for at all?" interposed Mr Smith. "Why should he not keep me company

for a day or two while you are away? I am alone. I need him. Come, Captain Wellwood, show yourself good-natured, and have pity on a lonely man."

Philip hesitated.

"You are his only check," said Sauffrenden, in a low voice.

"You are awfully good; but I think, and Lord Sauffrenden thinks, perhaps we can hardly both leave Colonel Aytoun," said Philip to Mr Smith. "He knows he is no favourite already, and it might seem rude. Mrs Aytoun might think it rude."

"Very true," said Mr Smith, hastily. The allusion to Mrs Aytoun pleased him.

"The fact is," said Philip, looking him full in the face, "they are friends of yours, so you know all about it; one could not put up with him a day, if it were not for his wife."

"And you see," added his friend, growing still more confidential, "it's rather shabby to leave Wellwood alone; but I can't stand it any longer. So, if you would go up there to-morrow, and make a third, instead of his coming to you, it would really be awfully kind. But I'm afraid you would hate it."

"Certainly I will go. But to be as frank with

you as you are with me, Colonel Aytoun is no friend of mine."

"Of course he is not, sir," said Lord Sauffrenden, warmly. "No one would ever suppose that he could be. The greatest beast I ever knew in my life. His very being in a house brings it into bad odour. The moment it was known he was here we got nothing but excuses from everybody. Spoilt our whole party and everything. But—well, his wife is my wife's cousin, and, poor thing, a sad time she has of it at home, so we ought not to grudge her a holiday. They may stay as long as they like; but I won't have my sister here with them, and that's why I am going up to town. I hate to see him look at a woman. What is his inducement to stay, however, I cannot imagine."

It was one of Lord Sauffrenden's peculiarities that whenever he was nervous, or taken by surprise, he, in the common phrase, lied like a hatter. Nothing could stop him, and nothing could cure him, for he did it spontaneously and unconsciously.

It had just occurred to him to wonder what Mr Smith would feel if he discovered, or even suspected, the object of Colonel Aytoun's present pursuit; and

being immediately thrown into confusion by the idea, he took as naturally to subterfuge as a rabbit to its hiding-place.

Philip understood, and it amused him. But the smile died away from his lips as he saw that Mr Smith looked impenetrably grave.

He had guessed the inducement.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER DINNER.

Mr Smith had asked the curate to join him and Philip at dinner, but the invitation had been reluctantly declined. Mr Rodney would have liked very much to accept, but it was Wednesday, and he never dined out on Wednesdays. The two gentlemen were therefore alone.

Dinner being over, they drew their chairs round a blazing and crackling wood-fire; having a small table, with the decanters on it, between them. It was very comfortable, very quiet, very warm; and, to tell the truth, the wine was very good.

Two more temperate men—temperate in neither going to one extreme nor the other—did not exist; but they each knew what good wine was.

They were troubled in spirit and cast down, and the wine comforted them. They had been walking

running, standing, and skating all day long in the sharp air, and the wine revived them. They sank back in their easy-chairs watching the play of fire-light on the polished steel; listening to the monotonous drone of the black cat purring, as she stretched herself full length, and nestled into the shaggy fringes of the Turkey rug, hooking it with her claws, and rubbing against it her sleepy head; and as they gently sipped the nectar, a spirit of resignation and contentment stole over them.

The afternoon had been filled with dull forebodings, disagreeable and dim revelations. Each had felt depressed, scarcely knowing why, unless it were that Colonel Aytoun's company was like a nightmare. To get away from him was in itself a relief. Philip breathed a sigh of satisfaction as he thought of his escape.

Here there was calm, peace, and rest. Mr Smith—yes, Lady Sauffrenden might say what she liked of him now—he was the best of fellows, and his wine was superlative.

Soon they grew confidential. It was easy to introduce the subject which in common filled their minds. Colonel Aytoun seemed a great way

off from that quiet crimson-curtained room, shut in by its barrier of frosty gloom outside.

From confiding in each other what they thought of him, what they had heard of him, and what they believed of him, it gradually became clear that each wished to discover if the other had anything to fear from him.

Mr Smith when, through Lord Sauffrenden's blunder, he guessed the inducement, had guessed it with a startling certainty.

It became to him a fact. He did not think, nor feel sure—he *knew* why Colonel Aytoun stayed.

The knowledge gave him unaccountable pain, he would have said, for Emmeline's sake. To have Emmeline slighted, degraded, before them all—to know that her wretched life was still embittered by fresh miseries—was it not enough to cause even such a pang as had shot through his heart, when with a flash of light the whole stood revealed before his eyes?

It was, it was; and yet—oh, shame to think of!—it was not Emmeline's image, it was not Emmeline's name, which had made the bitterness of that bitter moment. He had never once thought of her.

Had Captain Wellwood discovered this?

"Our friend," Philip presently began, "was talking last night in his usual free strain of the eldest Miss Tolleton. It appears they met at Sauffrenden in the old time, and he seems by no means to have forgotten it."

"I knew they were acquainted. Has—have they met lately?"

"He called on them last week. I happened to look in at the same time."

There was a pause—the same thought in both of their minds. "And he went there to-day."

"I think, Captain Wellwood," said the host at length, breaking the silence in an uneasy voice, "that you are a friend of these ladies. If it be a fair question, and you can excuse my putting it, do you consider he is forcing his company on them gainst their inclination?"

Here was a dilemma. A week ago he would have answered for them that such was the case. He could have testified from personal observation that they showed no desire for Colonel Aytoun's society. They had betrayed, he would have confidently affirmed, the very reverse.

But again, he had seen with his own eyes on this same day that of which he knew not what to think. Two opposite lights had been shed on the matter. Which was the true, and which the false?

He began slowly.

"That question, sir, is one I should have liked to put to you. I don't know what to think, for my part. The reception he met with, the day I was there, was anything but encouraging; but then, you see, my being there or not there might make all the difference. Miss Tolleton is no doubt very handsome and charming; but between ourselves she has more of the cunning of the serpent than the innocence of the dove. There is no saying what tricks she might be up to."

Was there more of the cunning or the innocence in this speech? If the former, it answered.

"She is incapable of tricks," said Mr Smith.

Not even an arch of the eyebrows escaped from his companion. Not a syllable, not a look of surprise. He gravely sipped his claret, and if he smiled he turned the smile inwards.

"She is incapable of tricks," pursued her champion,

warmly; "but, as you say, circumstances will alter manners. Colonel Aytoun is a man whom it is better to conciliate than to offend, and Miss Tolleton is——is a model of discretion."

The smile must have turned inwards again. Captain Wellwood replied, "Certainly."

"It is not every one," pursued Mr Smith, "who knows the sort of man he is; and his manner to ladies is——"

"Just so—beastly."

His friend laughed. "I was going to say most taking, most engaging, but the other is perhaps quite as appropriate, in fact they are reconcilable. How can you expect them not to be taken in by it?"

"She would not be that," said Philip, shortly. "Miss Tolleton is not so easily taken in; but I should like to be sure she did not fancy him in spite of all."

"In spite of all?"

"Oh, she knows well enough what he is," impatiently. "It is patent to all the world. There have been cases which he would have found it

hard to smother, if there had not happened to be others easier got hold of. The thing is not, does she know, but does she care?"

"Care?"

"Some girls are not particular. Miss Tolleton is fancy free; she would enjoy a spicy sort of romance far more than a humdrum commonplace attachment."

Was this mocking voice Philip's? Was this sneering blabbing fool himself? What possessed him? A demon of mischief, or a demon of malice? The moment passed, and he was himself again.

Mr Smith looked like a man who had received a blow.

His hand shook as he raised the wine-glass to his lips, and his voice was gone. It was not for several minutes that he had sufficiently mastered himself to be able to reply, and then the tone as he spoke made his companion painfully aware of his indiscretion.

"Perhaps you are right. She is very young; she has — no one else. There is one other thing I should like to say, and then we will close the subject. Did—I feel as if I ought hardly to ask

it, but it is impossible for any one knowing Colonel Aytoun as I do, not to be anxious about his admission to the house of any friend—did he go there to-day?"

"Yes."

Yes, he had gone; gone to seek and find her alone. Perhaps she had permitted him, perhaps she had even sent to him. An idea to be repudiated, yet, alas! not finally. Thrust it out as often as he would, it rose and looked him in the face again.

Could it, could it, *could* it be?

And then what was to be done? Were they to stand by in calm expectation of the end, while she might have her all at stake?

Oh, to know more! Oh, to do something! Oh, to crush that wretch, that fiend, that smiling, scowling, despicable hypocrite!

And was it not cruel, after all, to cast a reflection upon her? Captain Wellwood had done so, and he had listened. He felt as if they were both traitors. They had no right, no warrant for such suspicions. They were condemning unheard—striking in the dark.

His anger rose against Philip.

With inexpressible comfort he scattered his testimony to the winds, and scorned his base insinuations. One moment he had faltered, but now he knew better. He said to himself that he at least would be no false friend; he would be true and firm, let who would flinch from her side.

When Captain Wellwood had left he thought over a plan of action.

He would speak to her. He was no longer young; he might have been, had Emmeline been his wife, the father of girls nearly as old as she. He knew the man whose foul name might compromise hers ere she was aware, and knew him as hardly any others did. Tales might be spread which would never reach her ears—she, so bright, beautiful, guileless, thinking no evil, and seeing no danger.

A shadowy phantom, subtle and gracious, stole into the seat beside him. Two liquid eyes appealed to his. A murmuring voice, a whisper too wonderful, too intoxicating for reality, filled his ear.

His breath came and went; he heard, but did not believe. He dared not speak; he could not move; a spell was on all his senses. She touches him; she bids him know it is not a dream. A

marvellous thing has come to pass. Her hand is placed in his. He falls on his knees before her. "Oh, Helen, Helen!"

Thump, bump, tumble over and over. The entrancing vision flies. Mr Smith has fallen off the sofa, the clock strikes eleven, and the fire is nearly out.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SECOND WALK TO THE VIEW.

When one's mind is made up to a thing, it is wonderful how soon the idea of it becomes familiar.

Mr Smith had no sooner decided on speaking to Miss Tolleton on the subject of Colonel Aytoun, than, instead of feeling it a burdensome duty, his repugnance to undertaking it vanished altogether.

At first he had, it is true, shrunk from the suggestion. It would be interfering; it would be indelicate. She would be fully justified in resenting such a liberty.

But other thoughts soon made their way. She would at least prize the motives which prompted the caution, and she would most certainly reap the benefit.

Satisfied of this, it would be paltry, cowardly, in him to withhold it.

The next point was, how to get the caution imparted.

Of course he could expose Colonel Aytoun before the whole party, and in such general terms as to leave out entirely any allusion to their acquaintance with him.

But he did not relish this mode of treatment. It was unsatisfactory, and might do more harm than good. Already he pictured to himself Helen silent, with pursed lips, Carry uncomprehending, and Lily vociferating volleys of interrogation. Nothing probably would be gained. He could not make assertions which he was not ready to prove if required, and how could he do that in the presence of a whole party? Besides, it would be an odd, unnatural, ill-mannered thing to do. He could not get up and suddenly denounce an old friend, as they believed him to be, without any sort of introduction to the subject. And if there were—which it was perhaps possible there might be—any shadow of truth in Captain Wellwood's hints, to the extent merely that she had been blinded by the opening address of this accomplished deceiver, why, of course, it would be the very way to rouse every generous feeling in his

behalf. It is never safe to turn against the absent.

To speak to the father with the knowledge he now had of that father's want of influence, he felt to be useless.

Mr Tolleton would go to his daughters—give his garbled version of the interview—set them all wild against Mr Smith, and in favour of Colonel Aytoun. Instead of anything being gained by this course, all would be lost. It would be worse than the other.

One course only, then, was left open. He must speak to Helen, and speak to her alone.

If necessary, if she proved incredulous, or perhaps even if she needed no such confidence, he might intrust her with the story of his life. This was to be as he saw fit at the time.

He began to speculate on his probable reception. It had never before struck him as strange that it was now three weeks since that memorable afternoon when she had come to him through the snowstorm, and he had seen nothing more of her.

He had told her then of the Aytouns coming. He fought his memory to bring before him how she had received the news. Nothing unusual had

attracted his notice in any way. He could not remember a word she had said.

Still he had not seen her since; and Colonel Aytoun had, for certain, once, and only too probably oftener.

Carry's and Lily's tale of their sister's headache recurred to his mind. Why had they said so to him, when immediately after Colonel Aytoun had left the ice? He remembered that he had barely begun to ask after Miss Tolleton when they had saved him the trouble of going on.

Did they want to keep him away from the house?

Now on one side, now on the other, argued the disturbed brain.

"If I were a young man," said Mr Smith to himself with a faint smile, "I should begin to think I was in love. But I am going to do that which does not look very like a lover. I shall speak calmly and dispassionately. I wish to take advantage of my position as her father's friend to tell her in plain terms the character of the creature who is molesting her. I have no further interest in the matter than her welfare. She cannot misinterpret that, and the

others shall have no chance of making me a laughing-stock."

The idea of being made a laughing-stock was, however, so distasteful, that he could not refrain from putting forth a few suggestions on the other side.

"Of course it would be ridiculous. Of course I should never dream of such a thing; still, I am but fifty, and Colonel Aytoun is fifty-one. Captain Wellwood did not see age to be anything in his favour or disfavour. He certainly held it no safeguard. I would make her happy; I would—— Pooh! this is worse and worse. How am I ever to speak to her to-day, if I fill my head with such sickly rubbish? Tra-la-la-la-lira! A fine day for a walk. I must go early and get to business. Somehow or other the thing must be managed. Tra-la-la-la-la."

Cheerfully trolling a Tyrolean scrap, he set to work on his breakfast, resolved to find his way to Freelands in the course of the morning, and take what chances Fortune offered for the interview.

Daylight made the whole affair simpler.

Oh for another walk to the view!

Then at that moment the brilliant, the delightful

resolve flashed through his mind—another walk to the view he would have.

The summer-house was complete. It had been finished two days before, but the other events of the week had combined to chase it from his memory.

Now the recollection came with exquisite surprise.

Miss Tolleton had promised to inspect the house when finished. He would claim her promise. He would ask her out before them all; and be quite frank, and open, and old-mannish about it. They would not have anything to laugh at.

She must come by herself—it was her summer-house; and he would walk off with her before all the windows of the house, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Such a day for the expedition! All the snow had melted before the frost came. The sun shone upon sparkling meadows, dripping glittering icicles, cracking furrows.

Helen Tolleton stood at the open glass-door of the drawing-room, looking out on the tempting scene with a dissatisfied air.

"I am so sick of that plantation," she said. "When these Aytouns are gone, I think I shall

never enter it again. Three weeks! And I have hardly been anywhere else! It is too bad. Sometimes I could throw up the whole affair, if it were not that, having gone so far, it would be a pity to undo all when it may be near the end."

"I suppose we shall meet him," said Carry, to whom this was addressed. "Lily and I are going to the village, and he is generally somewhere on the road."

"How do you know that? You have never met him."

"He told us yesterday, before he came up here, that he had been looking out for us every day, and wondered we never went to the village."

"You did not tell me that. How glad I am we took the precaution! Well, I shall persevere a little longer. But as for you two, it really does not signify; he can get nothing out of you. Let Lily answer him; she can, if she takes care."

"So could I," grumbled Carry, offended as she always was at this suggestion. "You and Lily always fancy I make mistakes, whereas the truth is, I never made one yet. But as for Colonel Aytoun, I am sure I have no wish to speak to him."

"If one only knew where he was!" said Helen, despondingly. "If I could but know he was safe anywhere else, I should like so much to go too."

"Don't get down-hearted, Nelly," said her other sister, coming in. "We'll find out all we can; and it cannot possibly go on much longer."

This consolation was meagre—it was insufficient. Helen knew Colonel Aytoun better, and knew that it could go on a very great deal longer.

She was sick of it, of him, of staying in the house, and neither seeing nor hearing anything new, pleasant, and exciting.

She said this to herself, and said it from the bottom of her heart, as the truth of truths it was. But the thought was hardly framed ere she called a halt. What was that? Some one coming through the plantation. Not Colonel Aytoun! Horrible, but quickly-dispelled fear.

No, it was a wideawake, a grey wideawake, a grey figure—Mr Smith.

Mr Smith coming through the much-abused plantation! He had never done such a thing before. And if she had gone with her sisters, she might just have missed him, and he would have come for

nothing. Did she not know whose presence brought him to Freelands? Of course she did. The having been kept at home, which had just before been bewailed as a misery, appeared now the greatest piece of good fortune.

It was all astonishment and delight. It was an adventure; it might be a climax.

Quick as thought she had stept out, and stretched her hand to meet him.

"Such a day! A day for summer, for June, for any time, is it not?" cried she, hardly knowing what she said. "Every one is out except me, I'm afraid. But you have met my sisters?"

He had seen them, but thought they had not seen him. In truth, he had taken pains not to be seen. On approaching the house, he had heard voices, and caught sight of the two girls closing the gate.

One he imagined for a moment to be Helen, but she turned her head, and it was Lily. He had quietly waited till the two figures disappeared in the avenue, and then, turning the corner, had immediately come in sight of herself. Fortune *had* favoured him.

Her father out, too; she alone—the house

empty; his reception all that was warm and flattering. Captain Wellwood's insinuations were thrown to the four winds of heaven.

Who could wonder if, sitting in that sunny room, listening to the pleasant words, and looking at the bright smiles, he felt again something of the enchantment of his dream? Sweet sorceress, who could wonder?

It was as easy now to prefer his request, as it would have been difficult at any other time.

She granted the petition before it was half uttered; answered the look; and rose with such an eagerness of assent that had he not read these signs aright, it might have filled him with presumption. He told himself so. But he was wise and understanding, and there was no danger.

She softly opened the door, slid across the hall, and returned fully equipped before many minutes had elapsed. No one else stirred in the house. When she came noiselessly back, she was impatient to be off.

They set off through the plantation. Once out of sight of the house, Helen talked fast and excitedly, and her step was more rapid than she had any idea of.

If Colonel Aytoun were anywhere about! If he should see them! If he should meet them!

Well, let him. This was her chance, and make the most of it she would.

She had been shut up, imprisoned, bored to death, for the last three weeks; and now that she had broken her tether, it seemed in the very breaking harder than before.

She would have a day of it. She was with the man she liked, and she had got away from the man she disliked, and there was a sense of danger, and defiance, and triumph about the whole proceeding, which made the walking off with plain Mr Smith quite a feat.

Certainly a meeting with her enemy would be critical. But she meant not to meet him. She meant that while he pictured her dragging out her time in the routine of a stuffy sick-room, or, disbelieving that tale, condemned to be shut up in the house dull and moping, she should be taking her fill of the glorious sunshine, and the pleasant companionship which had so unexpectedly come to her. She laughed at her tormentor.

As soon as they left the short cut they were out

of the way even of this chance danger. There was not the slightest fear of a meeting in Mr Smith's private grounds.

The long path among the woods was admirably adapted for a lovers' walk. Two could walk abreast, while more could not. Two could say what they liked to each other, and only the larches and the oaks whisper the secret. And though, perhaps, when the heights were climbed, and the little plateau gained, there might have been room for more than two in the pretty summer-house now resting there, yet surely if there did happen to be only that number in it, no two people could have been more happily placed.

It seemed made for a tryst—for the site of a confidential conversation.

It was not, however, until the summer-house itself had been inspected all over, and admired from within and without, that the owner, turning to his fair companion, took her hand and led her to the seat, confessing that it was for a confidential conversation he had brought her there.

Helen's heart gave a great stound, and the colour which rushed to her face could not escape his notice.

They had been laughing and chatting gaily all the way; and so gaily, so easily, that even as she grew more confident of her power over him, and more certain of his recognition of it, she had lost her anticipation of any definite results of the day.

Such an idea had crossed her mind at the first; but in the absence of anything to feed it, it had gradually been dispelled.

She must bide her time. She was more and more sure of him, and more and more satisfied with him; and so well pleased was she with his words and his looks, and his whole bearing towards herself during the walk, that a few more such meetings would, she was assured, leave her nothing further to desire.

The summer-house, he owned it now, and with a most significant hesitation, was expressly hers. He should never have thought of it but for her suggestion. It was no longer a pleasure she had given him—it was now treated as one he had designed for her.

And then, just as she had taken in the full meaning of the compliment, and had made a most spirited and suitable rejoinder, all in a moment he had drawn her inside, and confessed his purpose.

A confidential conversation! Who has nerves not

of catgut—who has a heart which is not a mere pumping-machine—who has curiosity not stone-blind, and can be in for a confidential conversation without a qualm? And then, between a man and a woman! A man, too, who might be a lover, and a woman who wished him to become so!

Helen might be pardoned if at that moment she thought it was all coming, and felt herself taken at unawares.

The warm blood she could not curb, leapt, as we said, to her cheeks; and Mr Smith saw it, and I am afraid he rather liked it.

He sat down at a little distance. He felt an awkwardness about beginning. He turned his eyes away. The blush had made him feel young, and youth should be cautious.

"I may say what will explain my boldness," said he.

Then Miss Tolleton felt sure he meant to say something to the purpose. She was calming down. Her assent was almost steady. "Oh yes."

"But if I do, I must have a promise first."

"What promise?"

"That you will not be angry with me. No, I will not say that, but rather that if you are angry with

me—if you think me interfering and impertinent, and feel disposed to bid me mind my own business—you will think of this, that I have but one motive, the regard, the—the—may I say it?—the affection I have for you and yours; indeed, it is a very deep and true one."

He had not meant to say so much. He was shocked at the sound of his own words. He was losing his head altogether, had not her cheerfully unmoved rejoinder acted as a restorative.

It was not quite what she had expected, and she was able to speak indifferently; but had it not been for the last clause of the sentence, her tone had not been so cheerful. "I am quite sure that anything you say will be prompted by kindness and friendship; and as to your being impertinent, no one else would ever think of such a thing."

"Would not you?"

"Do you think I should?"

Smiling at him, testing him. Could he help being inclined to draw a little nearer, yet constrained to keep away?

No, he was sure she would not, and he should speak freely.

"It is," he said, "about Colonel Aytoun."

"Colonel Aytoun!"

"You may well be surprised. Colonel Aytoun's affairs are not much to either of us apparently. We have only once spoken of him before, and on that occasion both of us, I think, owned to merely a slight acquaintanceship with him. Your words, dear Miss Tolleton, I remember perfectly. 'A very slight acquaintanceship.' Was it not so?"

"Yes," said she, faintly.

"And I, I think, did not claim much more. Yet I have known him, and intimately, for twenty years."

She uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"Yes, it is just twenty years since we first met." He paused to consider whether he should now enter on the circumstances.

"And you have been friends ever since?"

"Friends? No." He resolved he would tell her. "It will be best for me to speak plainly. You will not wonder that it should be painful, but perhaps you may wonder when I say you are the first person to whom I have ever told the story of our meeting. Many know it, but not from me. To you I will myself explain it briefly, for you will not mis-

understand me. I would not expose Colonel Aytoun without a reason. I have a reason now."

Her cheek was not flushed at this—it was paling fast. She thought she knew the reason.

"You know Mrs Aytoun?" said he.

"Yes; no—I have really never seen her."

"Indeed! But, of course, you told me so. She was ill when you were there. My story relates to her. She was to have been my wife."

"Your wife!"

"Yes, indeed; my dear and honoured wife. Her hand was promised me; her heart I thought already mine. Our wedding-day was close at hand, everything prepared, and but for the death of a relation she would have been my bride before ever she had seen Colonel Aytoun. But the day was put off for a month, and in that month all was changed. He knew all about it. I will not say, perhaps I ought not to say, that the knowledge acted as a stimulant, but it certainly was no check. He pursued her, openly and in secret—took what he could get before others, and the rest by stealth. The thing was done; and it was only when done that there were plenty to tell me this had been his

aim from the beginning. He had been freely boasting of his intentions among his brother officers."

"And they helping him?"

"No; I believe they never dreamt of his succeeding. He had been a laughing-stock among them, and they were in hopes of seeing him baffled. In fact, they laid bets on either side, and made a joke of the affair; but they were ashamed of it afterwards. Some of them I can name among my best friends. They meant no harm—they had not calculated on his achieving such a triumph. He had worked for it with his whole soul."

"I believe it!" said Helen, passionately. "I believe every word of it! It is just like him! Just what he would do!"

"And this is Emmeline's husband! Poor, poor Emmeline! The most to be pitied of women. The sweetest, the saddest, the loveliest——"

"Is she?"

What a world of meaning in that soft exclamation!

He stopped, confused and conscious. Her heart sank.

"I have always heard so of Mrs Aytoun, and now

I am sure of it. How I wish we could have known her! But I am interrupting you?"

"No, no; you recalled me to myself. I was thinking of her as she was then, and when you see her now you will say I am dreaming. She is altogether altered."

"Oh no, I am sure we shall not find her altered," with returning animation. "I have no doubt we shall think her all you describe. But what am I talking about? We have no likelihood of seeing her at all. We do not know her, and we do not like her husband."

"Do you not like him? Dear Miss Tolleton, that is the very thing I wished to be certain of. He is not a man to be liked; he is not a man to be trusted; he is not even to be known by a young woman, if she can avoid it."

"Indeed I believe it; I have heard so before, and I know it is true. Oh, Mr Smith, I too have something to say about him. I do know him better than I chose to allow, but I do not wish to know him —none of us do. We are resolved to drop his acquaintance if we possibly can. Are we not right?"

"Indeed you are, if I may say so. It is the best thing you can do."

"But you see he does not like it."

"Who would?"

Both were smiling now, both were relieved, both happy.

"I do not wonder at him in the least," said he.

"I do wonder, however," rejoined Helen, her indignation again kindled, "that after he has been shown as plainly as we have shown him that we wish to give him up, he should persist in forcing himself upon us."

"You can refuse to see him."

"We can—we do. But he annoys us continually; he will not take a refusal. It is absolute persecution."

He looked thoughtful.

"Your father should tell him plainly."

Helen looked, but could not well say that he did not care a rush for her father.

"You know what he is."

"Yes; but still I cannot quite understand it. I suppose—you know I am to be impertinent—that he is rather a friend of yours than of the family in general?"

"What makes you think so?"

"My knowledge of Colonel Aytoun."

"It is true, but I am no friend of his. And he can be no true friend of mine to go on as he does."

"My dear young lady, he is no true friend of anybody, and certainly can be no right one for you. I used a wrong expression; what I meant was, that you were his attraction?"

"Yes," said Helen; "I believe I was."

"And are still?"

"Yes."

"You are not displeased with my freedom?"

"No; you never displease me."

"Then let me say this. Colonel Aytoun has had many women whom he has sought after. If I were to say the whole truth, I believe he cannot see a beautiful woman without seeking after her. But he is also the most fickle and capricious of human beings. As soon as the novelty has worn off, he has never been known to attach himself permanently to one. This is what I cannot understand in the present instance. To be candid and uncomplimentary, whatever he thought of you at first, he ought to be quite tired of you by this time."

Helen laughed. "I wish he were."

"So do I. You would soon cease to regret him. But you say he is not?"

"No." She laughed again, but a great idea was in her mind. It showed what Helen might have been; not, alas! what she was.

"I *will* tell him; I will tell him all. He is so good, so kind, and so—yes, I am sure he is so very much in love, that now is my time. Then, Colonel Aytoun, I defy you."

And so, with hardly a thought of what she was going to do, she rushed into the subject.

"You have told me a great deal that must have been very hard for you to tell; it would be a poor return if I were to conceal anything about this matter. The truth is then, Mr Smith, I cannot be quite as decided as I should wish in forbidding Colonel Aytoun the house."

He looked attentive.

"Do you remember my telling you I had been a giddy girl?"

"Yes."

"And you would not believe me; but you must now."

"Surely if I must, it is no such great crime in one so young and so——well?"

"You must believe it, because it has given Colonel Aytoun a hold over me."

"Then the hold is gone."

"Gone? Yes, in a way. But even when the hold is gone, there are broken ends remaining. Don't you see?"

"I see," he said, gravely.

"I will tell you the truth, and the whole truth, Mr Smith; all I ask you to believe is, that it is the whole. Bad as my behaviour was with Colonel Aytoun, there is nothing lying behind what I confess."

He breathed more freely.

"I was only seventeen when we stayed at the Abbey," continued Miss Tolleton; "and I thought Colonel Aytoun then all that was delightful. He took pains to be so—he did indeed. Mrs Aytoun was ill, as I said, and there was nobody to interfere. My father never sees these things. I know that people made remarks—it was natural they should. We were never apart. In plain terms, we flirted together horribly. For myself, I can only say I never look

back on that time without shame. Oh, you don't know how I hate myself whenever I think of it!"

She had done it now, for better for worse. The truth was out.

To say he was not startled, not shocked, would be untrue.

Only seventeen! Was that a palliation or aggravation of the offence?

Flirted horribly with a married man! People made remarks! Never apart!

Her words seemed to have burnt themselves into his brain.

He had called her a model of discretion. Had any one else asserted what he now heard from her own lips, he would have scorned the calumny. Had the same thing been said of any other girl among his acquaintance, he would mentally have contrasted her with the prudent, gracious, all-charming one beside him. He could hardly credit it. He felt a stagger in his faith. His idol shook.

It was another blow of the kind Philip had struck him the night before. That, he had rallied from. It had passed, and left scarcely a mark; but this was a deeper one. He felt it through and through.

All this Helen marked. True, her eyes were on the ground, and her head averted; but her woman's instinct told her as certainly as if he had spoken the words, that he was unprepared for this.

She felt him pause; she felt his bewilderment, his stunned surprise. She wished she had let well alone.

If she had only stopped short of the whole! All had been well, up to a certain point, and then it had miscarried. If she had owned to knowing Colonel Aytoun intimately, and then, on discovering more of his character, wishing to shake him off, it would have been sufficient. It would have been quite enough to account for his anger, without a word about the flirtation. So far he had understood, and approved.

Now, by one false step she had ruined all. Why could she not have held her tongue? What prompted her to be so unnecessarily candid? She resolved that whatever came of it, nothing should ever induce her to speak upon impulse again.

Yet she had thought she could trust him. She had fancied—strange, foolish fancy!—that he was more noble than he proved to be.

If she had fallen in his eyes, so had he in hers.

All this passed in the two or three minutes' silence which followed her confession. Each was occupied with thoughts of the other.

"We had better come now, perhaps," said Miss Tolleton at last. Her voice was hard and cold, and she rose as she spoke. "You have heard all I had to tell, and will understand it would not be pleasant for me to have it repeated."

He had risen involuntarily, as she did, and their eyes met.

There was a forlorn look in hers which belied the measured words, and in an instant all was changed.

"I cannot go yet."

"Why not, Mr Smith? We have nothing further to say to each other, I imagine. The subject has occupied us long enough, and for the future we will, if you please, drop it. I shall be wanted at home now."

"You may have nothing more to say to me, but I, Miss Tolleton, ought to have something to say to you. Pray, pray do not turn away. Hear me, though I do not deserve it. I cannot express my feelings on hearing you so nobly, so generously, avow

an indiscretion which your present true, gentle, maidenly modesty only contradicts too flatly. If for a moment that very contradiction, being so extreme, made the revelation startling, it was but for a moment. Can you forgive that moment? I ought not to have hesitated, but I hesitate no longer; my regard and esteem for you are higher than ever."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Dear lady," he said, taking her hand, "you told me this, taking me for a friend. Will you not forgive your friend?"

"I did not think——" she murmured.

"No, how could you? You did not dream of so harsh, so unjust a judge. A counsellor you wished, and found a father confessor, ready with penances and paternosters. That's right; let me see you smile again. Now I know we are friends."

"If you will be friends with me."

"Hush! Not a word of that sort; you must not be hard upon me. Friends with you indeed!" She almost thought he would have kissed her hand, but he only held it, pressed it, and let it go.

"That is settled then. And now one word more.

I know this Aytoun well. He is a bully and a coward. You have in reality nothing to fear from him. Let him say what he will, he is nowhere believed. His habit of boasting of civilities shown him is so universally known, that he can hardly find a person to credit him. Of *you* he may say what he likes. Nothing will so effectually give the lie to any slur he would cast on Miss Tolleton as a knowledge of herself."

"Shall we come now?" said Helen.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE END OF THE WALK.

On the way home conversation slid into easier topics.

Mr Smith's manner was grave, but Helen felt that it lacked none of its former interest. She too was thoughtful. What had passed within the last hour had touched her in more ways than one, and she felt in no mood for gaiety.

If he had asked her at that time to be his wife, she would have vowed with all her heart that that heart should be his, his truly, and his only, till death did them part.

But he did not ask her.

Towards the entrance of the wood path, and just behind a bend in the hill which concealed it from passers-by, a shallow stream trickled across the way. In summer time it was dry, and even when full was easily crossed by means of stepping-stones. During

the frost it had been frozen over, and was scarcely distinguishable from the path.

Mr Smith and his companion had crossed on their way up without noticing that they had done so; but ere they returned the sun had so far softened the ice as to leave some of the stones, which had been taken out of their places by the former floods, loose.

On one of these Helen placed her foot. It overturned, and she fell her full length on the path.

With an expression of concern, Mr Smith attempted to raise her, but to his surprise and her own the attempt was followed by such pain as to make her cry out, and the colour leave her face.

"Wait a minute, please," she gasped; "this will go off." But attempting to say more, her voice failed, and her eyes closed with a look of suffering.

He bade her lean on him, and tried again to raise her in his arms, but in vain. After the fall, she had, with the first involuntary exertion, drawn herself up into a sitting posture, but this she was unable to change.

It was evident that the hurt was severe, and she confessed to a fear of having sprained her ankle.

"It gives me such a twinge," she said, "if I make

the slightest effort to move it, that I am afraid it must be a sprain; but perhaps it may go off—in a few minutes—I hope; wait a minute——"

"There is no hurry—do not think of moving," said he, soothingly. "By-and-by we can try again. Perhaps you would take my stick—or my arm," hesitatingly. "But do not move yet. Unless, indeed, the ground is so wet—do you think you can?" for she was making another effort.

He put his hand under her elbow, he put his arm round her waist, and she struggled to the bank; but there the eyes closed again, and a convulsive twitching of the lips made him kneel beside her, terrified.

"Dear Miss Tolleton, what shall we do? You must have help. You must have a surgeon, and——"

"Oh no, no surgeon; it is really not worth while!" she cried, suppressing with difficulty exclamations of pain. "I only feel a little sick and faint. Ah!" with relief, as her hat was gently taken off, and a wet handkerchief applied to the forehead—"I shall be better now."

Her head sank down upon his shoulder. She did not half know what she was saying, but she was

perfectly conscious whom she was saying it to. Sick though she was, and faint, and bearing her pain as bravely as she could, she was racking her brains all the while to consider how best to extricate herself from what might prove an unpleasant dilemma.

If possible she must walk home. The stick would be a help, but his arm she hardly could accept. How if she had to do it, however? How if she could not walk at all?

Even so it proved. She could not walk by any possibility, with any assistance. Every fresh attempt brought on a fresh spasm, and at last the joint began to ache and throb even in repose. It was clear that there was no prospect of her being able to move, far less to walk any distance.

Matters began to look grave. Each grew conscious that the accident was more serious than it had seemed at first.

Helen, uncomfortable in mind, and suffering in body, could think of nothing. He had to decide for her.

"There are only two things to be done. If I remain here with you, and trust to the chance of attracting the attention of passers-by in the short cut, we

might be here all day. I am certain you ought to have assistance at once. Yet how to leave you!"

"Leave me!" said she, faintly.

"Must I not? You must decide. But indeed, indeed, I fear it is the only thing to be done. I know this ought to be attended to at once, and if I wait——"

"Oh, not *here!*"

He understood. "No, at your own home. You are growing worse every moment. Can I go?"

"Yes, yes," cried she, herself again; "I see what you mean. I trust you. But oh, Mr Smith, you will not—you will go straight to my sisters——" She could not express what she meant, which was, "You will not let any one else hear of it?"

"Where shall you get help?" she asked.

"I am going now to my own house; it is nearer than yours, and there is nobody to be alarmed there. Besides, I have a small pony-carriage which is not too broad for the short cut, and if you are not able by that time to crawl so far, I can carry you."

"Oh, I shall be able to walk. Thank you, thank you; it is a good plan, and we have no carriage to

come if you did go home. Perhaps it will be able to go by the plantation."

"Certainly. The path there is no narrower than this."

"That will do then," said Helen, wearily. "I am giving you so much trouble, but you are too good—no one need——" Her broken sentence, her embarrassment, told him what was in her mind.

"No one need ever know anything about it," said he, in a low voice.

And then he was gone.

He was gone, hurrying along, out of sight the next moment, a tumult of thoughts whirling through his brain.

No one need know. What?

No one must know, no one should know the extremity of his folly and delusion. But what was it that she desired to have concealed? Had she guessed it? Oh, mortification and shame if she had! That he should dare to love the fairest, loveliest woman in the land! That he should raise his arrogant eyes even to look at her! What wonder if she had scorned and laughed at such insanity? All honour to her that she had only yearned to hide it.

Noble, beautiful Helen! She had saved him this; what would he not do for her in return?

No one need know. He blessed her for the thought.

It seemed hours to the poor watcher's listening ears, before the light rumble of wheels on the path below told that her deliverance was at hand.

They stopped, and a minute after she had managed to rise, and was feebly trying to drag herself down towards the bank, when Mr Smith appeared, springing up the ascent, with a hasty step.

"My dear, you must not walk alone;"—he was going to be altogether paternal and easy in his treatment, he had resolved. "No, no; I don't care what you say. Put your hand on my shoulder. So! Let me put my hand beneath your elbow, and we shall be there directly. You are feeling stronger? That's right. The rest has done you good."

The pony-carriage came in sight. She half shrank back.

"I did not bring any servants," he went on. "Brownie will stand quite quietly. Servants are always in the way when there is exertion to be made, and I was sure they would only fuss you. In

fact, I told them nothing about it. When it gets abroad that Miss Tolleton has sprained her ankle, mind it shan't be laid at my door. Neither of us must say a word about this fine road we were so proud of. Leave it to other folks to imagine for themselves where it took place."

"They will think it was skating," said she.

By this time they had reached the carriage, and, with a sense of unutterable relief, she found herself seated in it.

Mr Smith was about to get in likewise, when, with sudden recollection, he put his hand in his pocket. "You are going to have a glass of port."

"Oh no, thank you." She was sure she could not drink it; could not swallow it if she tried. A lump rose in her throat. His forethought, his consideration for her, was almost too much.

He quietly poured it out, and to please him she tried. Yes, she must. He would not let her off till she did, and the wine was drunk.

"You are too good to me," she said, gratefully. "Yes, thank you, I really do feel better. Perhaps I shall not need the doctor."

It was evident she did not want the doctor, but

by no means so plain that she did not need him.

Long before they reached home her spirits had faded again, and her courage failed; and when he had seen her safely delivered into the care of her sisters, he had received their willing permission to go himself for Dr Hunt.

The doctor was at dinner, and came out to Mr Smith smelling of beefsteak and onions.

He pulled rather a wry face on receiving the message, and looked at the clock. The beefsteak had hardly been on the table five minutes, and he had just filled his own plate.

If Mr Smith would have come in and partaken thereof, and been civil to the doctor's wife, and seated himself beside Maria, the interruption would have been palatable.

But at that moment Mr Smith could neither endure the thought of Maria nor of the beefsteak.

He was full of one subject, he was not hungry, and he longed to be alone. The little, hot, noisy dining-parlour, with its rattle of knives and glasses, its inquisitive tongues and eyes, would be intolerable.

He delivered the message, and escaped. Miss

Tolleton had been walking out, had fallen on the ice, and sprained her ankle. He had offered to come for Dr Hunt, as he should be in the village sooner than any one they could send on foot. He pointed to the pony-carriage, excused himself, and drove off in it.

The doctor puckered up his mouth, and returned to the beefsteak.

"I do wish my dinner-hour were not always to be invaded," said he. "Jane, tell William to have the horse round in a quarter of an hour."

His wife inquired who had sent for him.

"Miss Helen Tolleton has sprained her ankle."

"Poor dear girl!" cried she. (Helen had been quite the poor dear girl ever since the entertainment at the Hill). "Poor thing! How came she to fall? Dear, dear! I must go and see her. I suppose it was at the meadows?"

The doctor supposed so too. The ice meant the meadows. He grunted assent, and took some more mustard.

"I know I shall have an indigestion now," said he. "Beefsteak is what I never can eat unless I have a good hour's quiet after it; and this is not as tender as it might be."

"Indeed it is, though, if you know where to cut it!" cried his wife, touchy on her housekeeping. "I asked Bullett himself how long it had been killed when I saw it hanging up, and he said it was Monday's. Cut this side, that bit hanging loose. What you gave me was as tender as a chicken."

But the doctor would not change his slice, nor alter his grumble.

"To have to start in a quarter of an hour after this!"

"Would half an hour not be time enough?"

"And have Mr Smith down upon me?"

"Mr Smith!"

"Ay, Mr Smith. It was he who brought the message; and I must say, for a disinterested person, he seemed curiously urgent about it."

"Jane, you can put the potatoes down, and come when we ring."

Jane left the room amidst an ominous silence; but if she stamped round the table heavily enough when in it, she must have had a lighter step outside. She was never heard going along the passage.

No one observed this, however. Mrs Hunt's voice rose in clear calm tones. "I do not understand what Mr Smith had to do with it?"

"Nor I, either."

"What did he say, Robert?"

"That Miss Tolleton had fallen on the ice and sprained her ankle."

"That's not what I mean, my dear, as you know very well."

"Perfectly. You need not be cross about it; I know no more myself."

"The thing is, how came he to know about it? Why did he bring the message? Could they not have sent a servant? That great bloated Corker——"

"Would have taken considerably longer time on the way. Mr Smith was driving himself; I suppose that was it."

Mrs Hunt's brow cleared.

"Very true; it was to save time. But now, how did he come to know of it?"

"He happened to be passing by; at least I gathered as much."

"Then you knew all the time!" in an injured voice. "It's as clear as day, doctor. She had a bad fall; the poor thing couldn't walk home, I daresay—and he offers to let you know. It was a piece of common humanity; quite what I should have ex-

pected from Mr Smith. There is no mystery in the matter."

"Who said there was?"

"Well, really, my dear, you looked so put out, I thought, I'm sure I can't tell what."

"Poor Helen!" said Maria. "How she will dislike being kept indoors in weather like this, and losing all her skating. She was not there yesterday, so I suppose she had gone early this morning to make up for it. How long will it be before she can skate again, papa—a week?"

"A week? There will be no more skating for her this winter, I can tell you. She may think herself lucky if she is out of the house at all before winter is over."

"Papa!"

"Ay, papa! But she may. It's all these miserable high-heeled boots that you will deform your feet with. The only wonder is that any of you escape."

"You won't allow us to wear them, papa."

"Not while I can help it; but some day when you have nobody but your husbands to look after you, you'll be just like the rest of them."

Mrs Hunt did not revive her suggestion about going to see Helen, and the doctor went alone.

He was not quite so easy as she had been about Mr Smith. She had only heard the message, and had not heard it delivered.

Mr Smith's version of the accident had been clarified and condensed by passing through his hands. It had been a confused jumble when first given; perhaps even a little purposely confused; particulars it would not have been convenient to state. When well filtered the story made quite a creditable appearance, as may have been seen from its effects on Mrs Hunt; but Mr Smith could not himself have gone through the process, without changing the face of the affair more than truth allowed. And of this Dr Hunt had a glimmering suspicion.

One thing, moreover, was impressed upon his mind more than all the rest, and that was that Mr Smith had insisted on his speedy attendance far more strongly than he had considered at all necessary. Cases of this sort were not so urgent as all that. He would have gone within the hour comfortably.

But he had found it impossible to say this; and beyond the disagreeableness of having to start with the beefsteak still in an undigested condition, was the unwelcome reflection that he was doing so by Mr Smith's special request.

By the time he had seen the sprain, however, he was partially mollified. Mr Smith might be excused. Miss Tolleton was in great pain, and her sisters were anxiously looking out for him. He had not exaggerated, although he had really meant to do so, when he had affirmed she might think herself fortunate if she were out before winter was gone. It was far worse than he had anticipated.

He was sorry for her now—as sorry for her suffering, as he had shortly before been angry with it. The invasion of his dinner-hour was a theme to rouse his indignation, but it was an abstract ire, seldom extended to the perpetrator of the offence. In this he imitated his wife. He had learnt from her how to scold in the piece.

As soon as the bandages had been applied, and directions given, curiosity must be satisfied.

"How did all this happen?" he asked Carry.

Carry professed her ignorance. She and her

other sister had gone to the village. Helen had been walking alone, and said she had slipped on some ice.

"On the meadows, I suppose?"

"I don't think it was on the meadows, was it, Lily?" Carry began to find her boasted powers of answering failing her.

"Oh no," replied Lily, coming forward at once; "it was not on the meadows at all. She was walking, not skating; just walking along the road, and her foot slipped on a loose stone."

"Whereabouts?"

"Really I don't know."

She did not. The quick-witted Helen had foreseen all this, and guarded against it. "Dr Hunt will try to draw the story out of you, as soon as Mr Smith has been to him, so you had better know nothing. Besides, I can't tell you about it just now; you shall hear the whole afterwards."

They had forborne to press her, and when it came to pass as she had prophesied, they felt her wisdom.

"Not that I could not have tackled him," said Lily; "but after all it was the simplest way."

She therefore said "I don't know," truly.

Meantime Helen lay with closed eyes, exhausted, and still suffering, but capable all the time of telling her tale had she been disposed, with perfect distinctness.

Dr Hunt would fain have forced it out of her. He looked doubtfully towards the sofa, but the closed eyes checkmated him. He was obliged to let her alone.

"It really is not safe," said he, in a solemn whisper, "walking about alone on these slippery roads. If Mr Smith had not happened to be passing by, your sister might have been there for hours."

"So she might," said Carry.

The doctor's eyes gleamed intelligence. He thought he had learnt one fact.

"How did she manage to get into the carriage?"

"I don't know, really. She could not walk a single step when she came here, but she said it was not so bad at first. Nelly!"

"Oh, don't disturb her!" said Lily, hastily. And the doctor was reluctantly compelled to echo the exclamation. He had made her comparatively easy, and thought she might by this time have opened her eyes.

But Helen knew better.

However, he had, even as it was, gained considerable comfort. That disagreeable vision of Mr Smith's face giving the message was partially dispelled. He had been startled, and was not accustomed to assisting ladies. He had done his best, driven her home, and come off for assistance. No man could, in common humanity, as his wife had said, have done otherwise.

And as to his being so hurried and fluttered in his speech, it was quite natural that he should be that. Unmarried men were often put out of their way, when they were suddenly called upon in an emergency: they were unaccustomed to it; they were taken by surprise. Living alone was apt to make people nervous.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HELEN HAS MADE A FOOL OF YOU, TOO.

HELEN had now a sad time of it before her. At first indeed she began rapidly to amend; but weeks passed, and her progress did not keep pace with them.

Her sisters wondered at her patience. Her father shook his head, and suggested that Dr Hunt should prescribe a tonic.

But Dr Hunt, who saw the very word taken, as it were, out of his mouth, sneered at the idea. Miss Tolleton needed a tonic less than any patient he had; all she wanted in that way was change of air, and, emphatically, society.

And then he went home and told his wife that any one who lived in the house with old Tolleton might well be sick for lack of other society.

Mrs Hunt suggested that his daughters, at any

rate, had lived with him long enough without that result.

"They have not been condemned to be in the same room all day long."

"Neither are they now, I suppose."

"The others aren't—she is. He is always there when I call, at least."

Mrs Hunt was a matter-of-fact person. "Depend upon it, it is not that, doctor."

"Well, of course it's not that, if you come to pick it to pieces. The girl wants air and exercise, and she can't have it. Besides, her nights have been bad, and she has gone through a good deal. Many a one would have been worse, but they have all good constitutions to fall back upon."

"I don't know that it is that either," said she, mysteriously.

"That what's what?"

"I'm not sure that it is altogether her illness that makes Helen so quiet."

"So I said this minute, and you pooh-poohed the idea. What are you thinking of now? What have you got into your head that makes you wag it in

that knowing way? It's something sharp and spicy, or I'm mistaken."

"Indeed, if you think so, we had better say no more about it."

"Heighty-tighty! You will punish yourself more than me, old lady. But come now, let us hear it."

"Oh no, it's a pity you should——"

"Don't be a goose, Polly. You and I ought to know each other by this time, and not start at a word. There now, that's a good lass, put pride in your pocket, and out with the worst."

"Well," said she, mollified, "it's only my own idea, so mind it goes no further, but I have an idea, I'll not deny. You know that Colonel Aytoun who was at the Castle?"

"No. How should I?"

"You know him by sight, that's what I mean."

"By sight? Yes, well enough. But he has nothing to do with the Tolletons."

"I'm not so sure of that."

He began to lose patience. "For heaven's sake don't make yourself ridiculous, my dear! Say what

you *are* sure of and be done with it. Has Colonel Aytoun been flirting with Helen? Is that what you mean? All I can say is, that if he has, he would need to keep it dark at Sauffrenden, for my lady there wouldn't like the notion."

"There are two ladies there who wouldn't like it."

"Oh, ah, yes, his wife; but no one thinks of her, poor soul!"

"But about Helen. I'll tell you how I came to find out anything. This afternoon I was sitting in the chair by the fire, and the room was rather dark; that drawing-room always is when the sun is off it, and we had been having a good long chat. Poor thing! I had been thinking of all I could say to amuse her. Well, as I say, the room was dark, and I suppose I was quite in the shade, for I could see Helen's face well enough, and it was that which told the secret. All of a sudden the door burst open, and Lily came flying in. She never saw me, or I daresay she would have thought twice before she spoke, but she called out, 'Oh Helen, Colonel Aytoun's gone!' at the top of her voice. I tell you, Robert, Helen's face was the colour of that curtain! They both looked at me, and Lily could have bitten her tongue out, I could

see. Helen answered well enough; she always can, you know. But she couldn't take me in. What girls they are, to be sure! How in the world could they have got hold of that man, and he at the Castle, where they can't get a footing at any price? 'Colonel Aytoun's gone!' That was what she said. 'Oh Helen, Colonel Aytoun's gone!' And then Helen got as red as a turkey-cock; and if I never saw that other one taken aback in my life before, I did for once."

"What did you do?"

"Just sat as still as a mouse. I wanted to see all I could see, and of course it was no business of mine. I never said a word."

"What did Helen say?"

"Something about being glad they had a fine day for their journey. But such a look as she gave Lily!"

"Well, what then?"

"Then I asked if they knew the Colonel well? 'Oh no,' says she; 'we only know them a little.' It was 'them,' you see, this time, though it was only 'him' that Lily thought about. 'It's quite news to you their going?' says I. She began to suspect me

then, I fancy. 'Only news because they have been here such an unconscionable time that nobody thought they would ever go. It had grown to be quite a joke among us.' This was her fine tale. Joke indeed! It was no joke that sent the blood to her white face like that, I could tell her. So then she went on, and she and Lily began to laugh, as if they were beginning to remember they ought to be amused. 'So you really have picked up something wonderful at last?' says she. 'Well, Mrs Hunt and I were just agreeing we never knew this place so dull.' And so she went on, but I was up to her; she can't put me off. I wonder what it meant!"

"If that is all you have to ground your story upon, Polly, I wouldn't give a brass farthing for it."

"All! Well, I should have thought it was enough for anybody who could put two and two together. But you are just like the rest of them. Since this ankle business, Helen has made a fool of you too."

Here the doctor looked undeniably a little guilty.

While the girls were going about, treating him saucily in their heyday, and doing their worst to

mislead his daughters, he had joined the rest of the world in railing at them.

But Helen in her bed and on her sofa, was different.

She was in pain, she was brave, and she was beautiful. She welcomed him with a smile, and bade him good-bye with a petition that he would come again. He was her only break in the day. He took her books, pictures, and all the news he could collect on his rounds. In truth he really was kind, and agreeable, and her only resource.

He began to like his visits in spite of old Tolleton, who would always come hovering over the invalid, asking foolish anxious questions. Dr Hunt, instead of thinking the better of him for this little trait of honest fatherliness, felt an increase of dislike.

If he could only have prescribed Mr Tolleton's banishment from the sick-room, he was convinced his patient would have improved.

Even as it was, his visits to Freelands were frequent; more frequent perhaps than any one but himself thought at all necessary when there was nothing wrong but a sprained ankle.

Mrs Hunt, in consequence, had more than once

found herself set right on points regarding the family in a way that did not suit her at all; and though her husband had in the present instance no thought of standing up for the absent accused, she took this to be the reason of his throwing discredit on her story.

"My dear," said he at last, very meekly, "you ought not to say things like that. What would the girls think if they heard you?"

"Why are you always taking their part, then?"

"I never thought of taking their part. I believe they are quite equal to amusing themselves with Colonel Aytoun, if he chose to amuse himself with them. But I don't think your evidence is strong enough to prove that they have—that's all. What is a blush? Helen has one of those skins that you can see the blood move through, if she only talks fast. I dare swear it was all in your fancy."

"I suppose what Lily said was all in my fancy too?"

"Well, no. But your fancy could change the way of saying it. If it was a joke, as they said, she might very well come in full of it, glad of anything to amuse the poor girl lying there all day long; and you might easily mistake her meaning. You know

Lily's excited way. She makes mountains out of mole-hills."

Mrs Hunt pursed up her mouth, and twirled some thread round a button she was sewing on, with the velocity of a humming-top.

"If you choose to take it that way, of course you can; but I believe my own eyes and ears. It is the way of those three, Helen at the head of them, to flirt with old and young; and you may depend on it, Colonel Aytoun was not too old for them, if Mr Smith was not."

"Old? no," said the doctor, hastily. "Colonel Aytoun's not an old man; a year or two older than I. But what do you mean about Mr Smith? He's Maria's man, not Helen's."

"Well, Maria's man, now," said Mrs Hunt, doubtfully; "if it's all right, as I hope it is. But I must say it looks rather queer his going off without a word to one of us."

"Then what did you mean about him and Helen? I thought you had given up that idea."

"She was good-natured, I will say that. And they all behaved wonderfully well about it. Whether they ever tried it on with him or not, makes no

difference. It was all the better in them if they did."

"You think they did, then?"

"I'm sure I shouldn't like to say positively. I am never the one to take up a report without good grounds for it; I always wish to be fair and just. Ever since Helen spoke to me about Mr Smith and Maria, I have always said I couldn't say to a positive certainty that she had had designs on him herself."

"Did it ever strike you that he had designs on her?"

"He! Mr Smith! No, indeed. What put that into your head?"

"Nothing at all. He went every day to ask how she was before he left, but of course he was bound to do that. I wondered if he had ever thought of her—just at the first, you know."

And the doctor hummed a few careless notes, very much out of tune, and scanned his wife's face narrowly.

Her answer was clear and forcible. "If he were thinking of her, how could he be thinking of Maria?"

"Very true. Yes; I suppose he is thinking of Maria?"

"Well, we were both of one mind about that, my dear, till now. But I don't know how it is, his going away looks a little odd; or else we are old-fashioned people, and don't understand the way these things are done nowadays."

"If we are old-fashioned, so is Smith. What could take him off in that way?"

"Did he not give you any sort of hint when he was coming back?"

"Not a word. It was Tuesday week, you know—no, it was Monday, for I was on my way to the meeting, and all he said was, that he was going from home, and might be away some time."

"And you asked him in?"

"I asked him in. I told him you and the girls were at home, and that you would be quite angry if he went away without coming to say good-bye. But he thought I was in joke, and said he could not flatter himself that such would be the case. However, I was to say he really had hoped to call, but business had prevented him."

"But he had meant it?"

"So he said."

"Well, I hope it's all right. At any rate, not a word to Maria. I think she misses him. I daresay she will be glad enough to welcome him back again. She shan't have another new frock till he comes, any way. After all, one can never tell what may be at the bottom of things. He may think she would never look at him after such a short acquaintance, and mean to go on with it all the same, by-and-by. One ought not to lay too much stress on his going off for a month or two, after the roving life he has led. With that house there, he is safe to come back to it again some time or other. He is not like those flibbertigibbets of officers who carry on high-sky up to the very night before they start, and then, whew! off they are, and you hear no more of them! Mr Smith's safe enough, to my mind."

But then she had not seen Mr Smith's face; and Dr Hunt felt that however much the return of their neighbour to his own house might be counted upon, his return to Maria was not so certain.

It took all his fatherliness, looking at her as she entered a moment after, to think that any one would prefer Maria to Helen Tolleton—any mere

acquaintance, that is to say — any stranger, any man.

Maria, when she came in, was not indeed a taking object. Her hair was rough; one side of her collar, by no means a clean one, had become loose; and her short dress displayed uncomely feet, badly shod and badly stockinged.

Feet are a point on which fathers, brothers, husbands are invariably susceptible. Dr Hunt remembered a pair he had seen that morning; a pair, not very small, indeed rather long and large, but admirably shaped, and delicately clad in the trimmest stocking and tidiest slipper; and wondered if Mr Smith was one to notice such things.

Maria was a good girl, he was fond of her in his way; but neither he nor his wife were exactly proud of their children.

Mrs Hunt glanced at her daughter, but forbore to remark. Since Maria had had the good fortune to captivate a rich bachelor, and she might hope some day to superintend her toilets, and see that she put on her fine clothes properly, she frequently let her present appearance pass without disparagement. Maria, she held, might be no beauty, but no one

could say she was ill-looking; and if all her accoutrements were correct, she would pass muster very well.

Maria sat down, and listlessly took up a book.

"What have you been about all afternoon?" inquired her mother.

"Nothing, mamma; there's nothing to be done."

"Nothing to be done! Well, *I* find plenty to do, at all events. I did not think any one in this house need complain of having nothing to do."

"I didn't complain, mamma."

Maria turned to her book, and began turning over the pages.

"You seem very much out of spirits," said her mother, regarding her for a moment, as she bit off her thread. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, mamma, I'm only dull." The guileless Maria fell instantly into the trap.

"Dull!" exclaimed Mrs Hunt, delightedly; "I daresay you are! We're all dull. Everybody away, and this nasty rainy weather set in. Poor Mr Smith will have a bad time of it. I daresay he wishes himself safe back at home many a time."

"Do you know, mamma, even the Fultons are gone."

"Where are they gone?"

"Goodness, mamma, don't look so fierce! I don't know where. It was the Tolletons told me, and all they said was that they went off at the same time Mr Smith did."

"Gone after him, I'll be bound!"

Maria bridled. "Do you really think they would?"

"I'm sure they would. Papa, do you hear that? The Fultons are gone off after Mr Smith! Maria heard it from the Tolleton girls. Did you ever hear of such a thing in your life?"

"They did not say that, you know, mamma; but I do think they meant it. Lily said she wondered if they had gone together."

Dr Hunt looked grave. Formidable rival as Helen Tolleton might be, Miss Fulton, if a rival at all, was more formidable still.

"Did they say anything else about it, Maria?"

"No, papa."

Dr Hunt gave his wife a look which meant that, in that case, they had better not say anything else about it either.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SICK-ROOM.

Mr Smith was trying the old, old lover's trick of running away from his love. It had come upon him suddenly with giant force. It had surprised him; stunned and overwhelmed him like an unforeseen calamity. He saw nothing for it but to fly.

A second time to love and not be loved was bad enough; but, at least, this time he could escape exposure and humiliation. At least he could bear his pain in silence, and in secret.

With these feelings he quitted the Hill about a week after Miss Tolleton's accident, assigning no definite period for his absence, and thus occasioning endless conjecture, and some consternation in the neighbourhood.

Consternation prevailed at Fulton. The Admiral humphed, grunted, and confounded under his breath,

while he looked at his sister, and took sweet counsel with himself, not daring to consult her. His rheumatism was insufferable; the Hall was damp, they must go off somewhere; and having hit on Mr Smith's trail, he did really and truly carry off the unsuspecting Cornelia, as Mrs Hunt declared, in pursuit.

Consternation, too, swelled in the bosoms of the Hunts; but there was another house where the blow was even less expected, and where it fell still heavier.

The Hunts after a time could rally and discuss the business, as we have seen, with a certain dubious serenity; but at Freelands there was little to be said, and nothing to be done.

Lily brought in the card, her face betokening disaster, and when Helen saw it she said not a word.

They had been talking much of Mr Smith. Helen wished to see him. She had been a week in her room, during which time he had called every day, and she felt sure that each visit had been a disappointment. He had expected to see her. Perhaps he thought she was even avoiding him. She must be wheeled into the drawing-room next day.

She now gave Lily her whole confidence. He was won; she felt convinced of it. His looks and words on that last meeting could bear but one interpretation, and she was now almost as impatient as her sisters to have everything settled.

Colonel Aytoun was disposed of. He might do his worst, and it was nothing to her. She defied him, and burned to exult over him.

The thought of the Hunts, too, was exhilarating. There was no broken heart in the case. They had all been of the same mind. The webs which had been spun to catch the great fly who had buzzed into their circle, had been woven of one common material. Indeed Helen felt, and felt truly, that she had a far higher regard for the man, as a man, than Maria Hunt was capable of.

The idea of Maria! All of a sudden she felt a blaze of indignation that they should have dared to think of such a thing. They were certainly not modest. It would do them all the good in the world to be taught their place.

Then she took a mischievous amusement in picturing the lesson.

She called up a vision of the blank faces, the

unbelief, the futile wrath. She made speeches, and put them into the mouths of Mrs Hunt and herself.

Mrs Hunt was to accuse her of tricking them. She was to own that she had. It was not to be supposed that she wished to have the attentions of any man made public. Eastworld was such a place for gossip, and, of course, it would have been very disagreeable to be talked about.

If Maria were mentioned, if she were blamed, as well she knew she might be, on that account, she had her answer ready. She knew it was nothing to Maria, and as it was a great deal to her, she had thought it fair to throw a little dust in their eyes. Mrs Hunt must forgive her. Of course if there had been the slightest, the very slightest reason to suppose that Maria cared, she would never have gone on with it. It was only because she was so perfectly sure of Maria's indifference that she had thought herself justified in saying as much as she had. Mrs Hunt, of course, would not be able to allow that it had been anything to her daughter, and could not well show that it had been anything to herself or her husband. She would be silenced.

Then there were the Fultons, and there were the Sauffrendens.

When she thought of the Sauffrendens she grew restless in her bed, longing for the time of triumph. She was better, she was well, she was quite fit to see her visitor. He was to be admitted. And at the end of the week she had actually obtained Dr Hunt's sanction for her removal to another room. If the library were turned into her temporary bedroom, there would be no obstacle to her being wheeled from it to the drawing-room, but he would not permit her to attempt walking.

Lily joyously undertook to superintend the arrangement, and followed the doctor down-stairs, making faces at him behind his back. If he knew what he was giving his consent to!

At the door she met Mr Smith. He was in the act of leaving his card, and there was a P.P.C. on it. Lily invited him in, but he excused himself, as she fancied, rather hastily. A few minutes explained the whole. He was busy, being about to leave home for a while, and had barely made time to come and inquire after Miss Tolleton. He hoped to hear that her illness was an old story by the time he returned.

Lily commanded her countenance, politely wished

him a pleasant journey, and was glad to give a most favourable report of her sister. She had just received permission, (with a glance at the doctor), to be in the drawing-room next day.

There was a momentary hesitation, but no withdrawal of his words. He begged his kindest remembrances, and took the seat which Dr Hunt offered him in his gig. The doctor too failed, when, in the language of Miss Taylor's spider, he invited his fly to "walk into the parlour." The fly flew away from them all.

Lily hoped she showed nothing. There was no one to tell her whether her face looked blank or not; she could only hope he had not been in the humour to observe. Nor had he; he did not even look at it.

He had come there with his speech fitly prepared, but it took all his nerve, and all his composure, as steadily to deliver it.

He had no eyes for the recipient of the message. What was it to her, or to any of them? It was of no consequence to any one but himself.

So he said what he had prepared, and departed, and Lily returned to the sick-room.

For some time after the blow fell, the sisters sat

in silence, the one with her face turned to the wall, the other nervously turning over the P.P.C. card in her hands.

At last she spoke. "Is there any hope, do you think?

"No."

After another pause. "What can it be?"

"I can't tell."

"Can it be anything about Colonel Aytoun?"

"I can't tell."

"Can he have been talking about you?"

"I can't tell."

"Oh Nelly, don't speak in that way! It sounds as if—as if—it can't be helped, you know. And after all, perhaps it may come right. If one could only find out what is wrong! If it is Colonel Aytoun——but are you *sure* you cannot remember anything? Did you never give him any sort of rebuff? You have a way sometimes of saying things that you don't mean, and he might not understand it. If you could but see him I am sure it would come right again. Can we not send and ask him here to-night, or do something?"

Then her sister turned round, and spoke sternly.

"No, Lily, I would not, for the world; I won't have him asked. Let him come or go as he chooses. It's all over, that's plain."

Lily was silenced. She too felt in her heart that it was all over. Consolation would be a mockery. She looked at Helen and did not attempt it.

After another uneasy silence she rose, saying, "I had better tell papa and Carry!" and left the room, glad to get away.

Helen made no effort to detain her. To be alone was a relief. There was no one in all the world, least of any her youngest sister, who could enter into her present feelings.

She had opened her mind to Lily when all was bright and prosperous. She had spread herself out like a flower in the sunshine; and now, like that flower, when night fell, and the damp chill crept on, she folded her sorrow within her own breast. It was a real sorrow, and a real loss.

She had missed not only the wealth and position, which, when she first contemplated accepting Mr Smith, had been her bait; but over and above this there was something which, until now, she had not herself realised.

She had lost a great chance in her life.

She had lost an influence, the first for good her life had known. She had lost one who trusted her, one who believed in her, one who, strangest of all, respected her.

To be adored she was accustomed—to be simply respected was something new.

No one would believe that she loved him. She was by no means sure that she did herself. But she liked him to love her; and this one grain of comfort remained amidst the universal blight—love her he did. Of this she was convinced. He might, he probably would, soon get over it; she was not disposed to dream of any renewal of her influence, but it gave her a faint, faint sense of satisfaction to know she had once possessed it.

Mingled with these reflections came the dispelling of all those gay and vainglorious visions so lately indulged in.

There was to be no triumph, no happy modesty, no repressed elation for her. It would be all she could look for, if she escaped the sneers of those who guessed her failure. Glad was she now that her flattering whispers had deluded the Hunts.

One thing was gained by the story of her accident having been suppressed. There were few, if there were any, who would suspect her.

Mr Smith and everything about him must henceforth be buried in oblivion; so far, at least, as that could be done, when he returned to live within two miles of Freelands.

Her active brain working thus, she nevertheless lay still as a stone. Lily, returning half an hour after, tea-tray in hand, found her as she had left her, one arm stretched outside the bedclothes, and her face turned to the wall.

It was so strange in Helen that she felt involuntarily awed.

It seemed natural to speak softly, to tread on tiptoe, and to make as little noise as possible. Her manipulation of the tea-things, and the tones of her voice, although she only said, "I have brought you some tea, Nelly," explained it all intelligibly. Helen, who ought to have been grateful, felt unreasonably irritated.

Lily meant well, and truly desired to share her trouble, but it was only of the most trifling part of that trouble that she had the smallest conception. Her

woe-begone aspect was at once provoking and ridiculous.

"For pity's sake, Lily," said her sister, petulantly, "don't look as if you had heard of a death! It is no such great thing. The man has made a fool of me instead of letting me make a fool of him, that's all. It is highly to his credit."

Lily felt instant relief. Now that Helen could talk in that mocking voice, and laugh in that bitter way, she was herself again. She was no longer to be feared; and having come down from her pedestal, they might at least have the comfort of wondering, imagining, and condoling together. She took another cup of tea herself, and climbed upon the bed.

"It is such a blessing," she began, "that nobody knows."

Helen sighed. Yes, it was. A poor sort of blessing, a small mercy, but still one to be thankful for. Had she known it, Mr Smith was at that very time hugging the wretched substitute to his own bosom.

"No one knows," pursued Lily, seeing that she was not repulsed, "and I don't believe any one will

ever so much as suspect it——" Here she suddenly broke off, showing in her face that something had struck her.

Helen was alert in a moment. "Who are you thinking of?"

"It was only Philip," owned Lily, rather flustered. "And I don't believe he will, either. There was never much to see."

"He will not repeat it," said Helen, quietly.

"But I daresay he never even noticed. He was not looking out, you know. I think he's safe."

Helen made no reply. She felt sure he had noticed; she could only trust to his honour.

"And there's no one else," continued Lily, "not a creature. Even the Hunts still think it's the lovely Maria! Fancy, Nelly" (laughing), "if it should be!"

Helen threw herself over on her side impatiently.

"Oh, do take care! You know you were not to move that foot. You have hurt yourself now. Lie still and I will tell you what Dr Hunt will say. 'My dear, Maria has been——'"

It was impossible for her sister to restrain a sharp exclamation.

"I do wish you would not be so very silly! What has Maria to do with it?"

"Only, you know, that if it isn't you——"

"It must be her. But I tell you, it *was* me. It was no one else; it was me, and me only. If there had been no me in the world, it would never have been Maria!"

The contempt with which she said "Maria!"

"Poor Maria!" said Lily. "She is not to be expected to think so little of herself, and tastes differ. It is a possibility."

"It is not," said Helen, with energy. "Not a whit more now than it ever was. You seem to think that because—because it is all over, there never was anything. But I tell you there was. It was as I said, more than I said, a great deal, up to the very end. Its having gone wrong now makes no difference. The very way he is behaving proves it."

"Why, then," said Lily, brightening up, "it may all come right again. What if we are making much ado about nothing, after all? It is quite likely, I

declare. What fun it would be if you got a letter from him when he was away——"

"Don't be a fool!" interrupted her sister, angrily. "As if there were the slightest chance of such a thing!"

"It may come to pass, all the same. Why, if it is as you say, and you are the best judge of that, what could have come in the way? Something about Colonel Aytoun, no doubt. Well, that will blow over, and he will return to his allegiance. I believe he will—I do indeed. He is not the man to be put off for a trifle."

"And that is what shows me it is no trifle. Besides, I told him myself about Colonel Aytoun, and that was tided over safely. No, there is something else. Perhaps he thinks I have been telling him only the half, like those creatures in the Bible who died for it. I wished I had, at the time, but I did not. I told him the worst, of course not in detail, but so that anybody could understand. How glad I am now that I did it!"

"Why," said Lily, dubiously, "I don't see that you gained much."

"At least I lost nothing, and we know that it isn't that. I am glad to know Colonel Aytoun has not had a hand in it, whoever has."

Helen did not ask to be wheeled into the drawing-room next day, and Dr Hunt forgot to inquire if she had been there.

Both were thinking of Mr Smith.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VACUUM.

PHILIP was the only person whom the sisters had thought could suspect anything. They had never dreamt of Lord Sauffrenden. Yet Sauffrenden knew more about the matter than any other human being.

When even the Hunts had been baffled in their efforts to discover the truth about the accident, he had chuckled a perfectly correct account of it into Philip's ear, coupled with the most earnest injunctions to say nothing about it at the Castle, and, above all, to keep the story from coming to the ears of that mar-plot Lorrimer.

He had brought Sir George back with him from London, and Sir George had inquired after Miss Tolleton, soon after his arrival, with a smile, which, to the good-natured match-maker, betokened ill to the match.

This was more than Sauffrenden was disposed to stand. It was hard enough on him not to be allowed to put his own finger in the pie, and preside over its internal arrangements; but to see another finger thrust forward stirring the wrong way, was what he could not stand by and see done.

He watched Sir George's movements like a cat.

All went well; his vigilance began to slacken. Mr Smith was daily at the Tolletons' door; and who so unprepared, who so filled with astonishment and wrath, as the lord of the manor, when on a sudden the bubble burst?

Mr Smith was off, Miss Tolleton still in her bed.

What had happened? How had it happened? Had anything happened at all?

Alas! he had nobody to answer these questions, unless it were Dr Hunt, whose authority was not always reliable. Milly would give him no help. To Sir George he durst not apply. Philip was useless. With a sigh he came to the conclusion that Dr Hunt was his only chance.

Well, he had a sort of tickling in his throat, and a disagreeable stuffiness in his nose, which he might as well see the doctor about. It was not worth while

to send all that way for a busy man, but he might call in as he passed the house himself that afternoon.

The symptoms disposed of, he soon found out all the doctor had to tell. This was not much. His version of the accident was by no means so correct as that of which his visitor was already in possession; but it was not for information on that head Sauffrenden came to seek.

"Very ungallant," said he, laughing, "in Mr Smith to take himself off, and leave the lady in such a poor plight—eh, doctor?"

"Miss Tolleton is going on very well indeed," said the doctor, gravely,

"No fear of that, in your hands. But he might have waited to see her down-stairs again. Such a true knight-errant as he had been, riding by just in time, and succouring the distressed damsel!"

"I don't imagine that Miss Tolleton will complain of his behaviour in any way."

"What! Eh! Has she been cold to him? Has he received his *congé?* Is that what you mean?"

"I am really not aware to what your lordship refers." Dr Hunt almost frowned. Had his interrogator been any one else he would certainly have

knit his brows; but, as it was, he merely checked such undue, indecent eagerness by a gravity as profound as he had ever summoned for a deathbed.

Mr Smith's face, giving the message at his door, rose before him, nevertheless, with a disagreeable vividness.

"It is not so, then," Lord Sauffrenden went on, feeling himself unaccountably thrown back. "There was a report, you know—but I daresay it never reached your ears — of his being a little touched in that quarter; and hearing of his running off in this way, I took it into my head to put the two together. It looked a little suspicious, you must own?" Here he regarded his companion inquisitively, wistfully.

Unkind man! There was not a shred of sympathy in his composition. He saw, he knew as well as possible what was wanted, but not a word was to be wrung out of him.

"People will say anything, you know, doctor, for a piece of gossip," continued the great gossip of Eastworld. "But I own I should be glad to know that poor Smith was not bitten—that he had not been ill-used by anybody?"

Immovable was the doctor's aspect, rebuke in every feature.

Thus pointedly addressed he could not choose but reply, but his reply was short.

"I never heard a word to that effect, Lord Saufrenden."

How small we feel when we have been showing a little bit of fussy interest in our neighbour's concerns, and instead of meeting with any answering warmth, we are confronted by a chill silence, a withering stare, an impenetrable, misty, veiled face! It was almost too much for human perseverance, when that face pertained to Dr Hunt. But one more effort made the courageous besieger.

"Well, well, you ought to know; you are a friend of both. As for reports, I never care a fig for them. I know better than to think twice about a report. Most of them, like this, are fictitious from beginning to end."

At last the doctor roused himself: his time had come. Now, he considered, one good blow might be planted with effect.

"Just so, my lord; a fiction from beginning to end. As you say, I am happy to reckon myself a

friend of both parties, and with ample opportunities for judging, that is my ultimatum. That Mr Smith was on excellent terms with the Tolleton family all the time he remained here, I know for a fact, and that he continued to be so up to the last, I had the proof of my own senses. I happened to be present during his last interview."

Here was something at last; a reward for long-suffering. *Patientia et perseverantia omnia vincunt.*

"Well?" cried Lord Sauffrenden. "Well?"

"There was nothing to relate, my lord" (mildly surprised). "Mr Smith bade the ladies 'good-bye' in the ordinary way. I merely mention it to dispel any suspicion that he had, or ever had had, any such intentions as your lordship hinted at."

"Then it was all nonsense, of course. Glad to hear you say so. Now I must not keep you longer." And having thus given in his hearty concurrence in the verdict, the disappointed inquisitor took his leave.

Once outside the door, however, his note changed. "My good friend, you are—to use a mild expression—as blind as a bat. No intentions indeed! If he had no intentions, after paying such attentions" (he

paused to gather up his indignation into proper terms), "he ought to have had them, that's all I can say. It's easy to talk of no intentions. I call it a scoundrelly thing to do. How would the doctor have liked his own daughter to be treated that way, though he could talk so coolly of the poor *T's?* I should like to have asked him to put that in his pipe and smoke it!"

Then he sought Captain Wellwood.

"What do you say, Phil? Is he off, or has she refused him?"

"I don't think she has refused him."

"You think he's off?"

"Well, I do."

"What in the world is at the bottom of it?"

Philip was silent.

"Have you any idea?"

"Yes, I think it's Aytoun."

Sauffrenden's eyes were opened.

Colonel Aytoun had kept very quiet during the past week, and had never repeated his call at Freelands, but he had been working out his plan of making friends with Sir George Lorrimer, and had at length attained his object in doing so.

Sir George, easy and unsuspecting, had not hesitated in exposing Miss Tolleton's tactics, and only that afternoon had put Colonel Aytoun in possession of them.

The affair had rather amused him. He could never think of the passage of arms at Sauffrenden without an inner laugh. He had even gone so far as to remember it two months afterwards.

But now the play had come to an end. It had collapsed rather flatly; and he related the circumstances with something of the shamefacedness of a narrator embarked upon an anecdote which he suddenly perceives is deficient in point.

Not so did it appear to his auditor.

For him the point was not only sharp, but poisoned.

Mr Smith and Helen! The conjunction had never once occurred to him. Mr Smith and Helen! Horrible! On her account, and on his, equally unbearable.

At that moment his new anger against her exceeded and almost eclipsed his old anger against him. The one was fresh, warm, and bubbling, the other stagnant.

Mr Smith had dared to love Emmeline, and dared still to pity and regard her. He would not be duped beyond a certain point. He was a popular man. He was high in favour with those who shirked his, Colonel Aytoun's, society, and try as he might, he could not do him a mischief.

Consequently he hated him.

But Helen was still worse. She had charmed him. She had had the enviable lot of attracting his notice. He had sought after her, thrown his net over her; and instead of being gladly caught, she had slid through the meshes, and laughed in his face!

He was neither a magnet to attract, nor a chain to bind. He was no bar to the end she had in view.

The man he had once supplanted he had no chance of supplanting again; and she might accomplish her desire, and he his, without let or hindrance.

No one could say nay. He might be made happy even yet, with a wife still more beautiful than Emmeline had been, and now, Emmeline was paled and faded. Youth, lustre, enchantment, might all again be his, while only the old, battered, dusty end of life remained for Egerton Aytoun.

It was this which made him stamp his foot under

the table, as his fingers clutched the wine-cup above.

Sir George had pronounced the matter to have no further interest; it had come to nothing after all. But Sir George had nothing at stake. Colonel Aytoun could not so easily dispose of it.

He was enraged with his own stupidity. What had he been about, not to have discovered this which was so much to him, when it had been plain to a heedless bystander?

If the mischief was done, it was done now. There was no hope of putting a spoke in the wheel, had Fortune once begun to turn it. Despite all assurances, he felt a sinking presentiment that it was too late.

Mr Smith away, Helen in bed, what could be done? There was no possibility of getting at either of them.

He might contort his lips, and force a grim sneer at the lady's disappointment, but what was that?

Sauffrenden was not to be borne any longer; and, disgusted with everything and everybody about it, he quitted the neighbourhood next day, dragging with him his ill-fated wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HELEN'S REFLECTIONS.

THE relief experienced by those left behind was great.

There was no more bolting out of doors the instant meals were over; no stumbling over each other in the hurry of escape. No more whispered entreaties, "You take him to-day," and conditional promises, "If you will to-morrow."

Sauffrenden once more yawned, and havered, and lounged about the passages as he loved to do; and Philip was to be found, as of yore, hanging about the terrace and conservatory, instead of hiding in the coverts of his own room.

The house was itself again.

Sauffrenden, however, had his grief. He mourned for the Tolletons.

He looked at his own camellias, his own forcing

beds, and longed to send something to the sick-room. He worried Philip with constant and fidgety inquiries, and dared his wife by talking before her face of the accident and its serious results.

Mrs Aytoun's account of Helen had certainly not been such as to change Lady Sauffrenden's former opinion of her. Emmeline had grown confidential since the days when she attempted to picture the Abbey a happy home. She spoke openly, and, alas! truly.

Her story needed not any colouring from the spite of a malicious husband, or the trampled-turning-again of a desperate wife; it was the plain, unvarnished statement of the girl's mad folly.

Every one about the Abbey could have told the same. Emmeline did not exaggerate when she affirmed that it had been the scandal of the neighbourhood. Helen Tolleton was not a girl to be known.

All this had been duly retailed into Sauffrenden's ear, and it must be confessed that he found it very delightful.

He loved to know the worst of people, but then, tenderly as he inclined his ear to the tale, it found him as tender, as merciful a judge. It was the very

interest he took in his brother men, the very sympathy he felt in their concerns, which made him first yearn to know their failings, and then filled him with compassion for them. There was this divine in the man's nature, he did not love sin and he did love the sinner.

It would have filled his eyes with tears had he been able to look now into Helen's sick-chamber.

There she lies, forbidden to move, yet unable to be still. Tossing over and over, wearying and wounding herself, wondering that she gets no better. Night is worse than day to her. She has nothing then to divert her thoughts, and they fly about, and buzz hither and thither, and sting her whenever they can, like angry, frightened wasps. The more she tries to drive them away, the more irritated and venomous they become.

Why do they all turn against her so suddenly? How is it that everything she has ever done seems all at once to be wrong? Do other girls vex and chafe over their lives as she does?

There was that young Lance, and Buckley, and Gordon, and hosts of others besides poor Walter, who really cared for her more than half the rest

put together—how she had gone on with them all!

Some had her hair; some, flowers she had worn; some had gloves; one or two even letters. How foolish she had been to write those letters! Painfully clear rose some of the expressions in them before her now. Theirs she would burn: that precious packet which had often caused her a secret thrill of exultation; it too stood up and condemned her.

It was their fault, of course. They would fall in love with her, and how was she to help that? She had only flirted a little in return, and with some it had answered, and with some it had not—exactly.

They had made themselves, and her too, rather ridiculous.

Ha! ha! ha! All of a sudden she would burst out laughing in the midst of her penitence.

Visions of doleful visages saying farewell over faultless neckties and unimpeachable shirt-fronts, rose before her. The pushing forward, the hustling each other for her smiles. The gloomy sighs breathed in the background; the jealous looks; the little mean insinuations; the open frown of the Colonel; the weak sneer of the subaltern.

Of these were the sparkles in her cup of pleasure composed. And now, how good she had been going to be! She had intended to put away the whole cup, sparkles and all, and take another in her hand.

She had made up her mind to astonish the world by marrying Mr Smith, and to astonish it still more by making him a good wife.

Her old life she had meant to have done with. There were other kinds of pleasures to be enjoyed, and of them she would have had the full benefit.

Mr Smith's character had given ample hope of this; and in return she would have been a model of graceful accommodation to his wishes.

He was a religious man, that was certain; therefore she had resolved to be, if not exactly religious, yet seriously inclined. A regular church-goer, and a teacher at Sunday-schools. (An ivory prayer-book and fan in summer, furs in winter.) He was so nice, so kind, and so pleasant withal, that it had seemed a perfect Providence his being thrown in her way, and her having taken to him from the very first, as she had done.

He was not at all the sort of man she would have

expected herself to take to. It was the veriest epicureanism in coquetry which had set her on. Then she thought he might do. Then she began to like him.

She took credit to herself for the whole proceeding. She was sorry for the past; she wished to do better. She desired to be out of temptation—safe, happy, and respectable. This way she had carved out for herself, and a glow of self-approval within her pronounced it a good one.

Oh, why was she not to tread the way? It was too hard, too discouraging, to be thus stopped short upon the threshold. It was enough to make her turn her back on goodness altogether, to have it making itself so very disagreeable.

Her sisters thought her changed, and she was proud of it. She had baffled Colonel Aytoun by her honesty, and disarmed Mrs Hunt by her prudence. She was certainly turning over a new leaf.

But these consolatory reflections had all their dark side.

Where was the use now of her good resolutions? Where was the use of trying to enter in at the strait gate when it clanged in her face? It was the cruelest, silliest stoppage that ever was.

CHAPTER XXX.

COLONEL AYTOUN'S DINNER-PARTY.

WEEKS now slipped by almost unmarked in the neighbourhood of Eastworld.

Mr Smith's disappearance and Helen Tolleton's sprained ankle had ceased to be two nine days' wonders.

The Sauffrendens were talking of their Easter party; Captain Wellwood growing daily more interested in the spring meetings; Dr Hunt reaping a small harvest of relaxed throats; and Mr Rodney doing all he could to induce people to keep Lent.

There was certainly little going on to lead the flock astray.

"We must have Rosy down at Easter," said Lady Sauffrenden to her husband, "as the Aytouns stopped her coming at Christmas. Shall you see her to-morrow?"

"I can, easily; I shall go there to luncheon. Phil wants to see his old chum Holker, so he can go to him."

"Is Philip going up with you?"

"Yes. He was going the end of the week, but I got him to make it to-morrow, not to let me go alone."

He never liked to go anywhere alone. If he had not Milly, he must have somebody. Milly, not being strong, avoided the London days, and therefore he was constantly on the strain inventing reasons for inveigling other people thither.

With Captain Wellwood he succeeded best, with the curate worst. Mr Rodney could not be brought to see that a clergyman was conferring a positive benefit on his parish by becoming a member of the University Club.

Now it curiously happened that one of the first people whom the two friends encountered as they left Paddington Station, was Colonel Aytoun.

The Colonel had on his best smile, and instead of responding to their cool and hasty, "How are you's?" by one of the same nature, he stopped, and held out his hand.

"You are the best people in the world to come across, you two. I have just seen your neighbour Smith, come back from his travels, and engaged him to dine with me to-night. Come and meet him. Lorrimer will be with us too. Smith is at their house."

"Of course we will; very glad to come. No engagement, eh, Philip? What's your hour? Eight?"

"Confound me! I could have bitten my tongue out for every word it spoke!" cried he, afterwards. "Why did you not stop me, you old good-for-nothing? I looked to you, and you wouldn't say a word to help me out. There's an end of our snug evening. How could you let me, Phil?"

"My dear fellow, how could I not? What could I say? You had your acceptance cut and dried while the invitation was hardly in being," said Philip, sulkily.

"My acceptance! What is my acceptance? You know well enough I never can refuse. I had to make it the heartier because I was racking my brain all the time to try and remember some excuse. You might have seen that."

"I saw it plainly enough."

"Well, why did you not help me, then?"

"Simply because I couldn't."

"To meet Smith too!" said Sauffrenden, fuming. "As if I cared to meet Smith! I never wish to see him again. I consider he has used that poor girl exceedingly ill, and she lying there on her sofa, all this time!"

"You don't suppose she is pining for him?" said Philip, sarcastically.

"That's not his business. She might be, for all he cares. I wish that Aytoun was at——and Lorrimer too! What can make Long George go to him?"

"Perhaps, like us, because he could not get off."

"Such a party as we shall be!"

"Humph!"

"I shall be very cold to Smith, I can tell you. I have no idea of a fellow playing tricks of that sort. At his age he ought to know better."

"Do you want this hansom?"

"Well, yes—we had better. That vile dinner has spoilt our whole day!"

Colonel Aytoun might have heard every word they said without being much enlightened by it.

He knew as well as possible what to make of Lord

Sauffrenden's abundant acceptance, and Captain Wellwood's gloomy face. It was not for their pleasure his hospitality was proffered. He had his own ends in view, and to further them this chance meeting appeared the greatest piece of luck in the world.

Mr Smith had only returned to England a few days before, but Colonel Aytoun had been on the look-out for him. His professions of esteem were louder than ever. He would take no refusal. "Mrs Aytoun," he grinned, "would be quite indignant with him if he went back to the Abbey, and told her that their old friend would not come near them."

Not to offend him, they had to accept. Sir George did not care. To him Colonel Aytoun had never shown his cloven hoof, and he thought other people painted him blacker than he was. He agreed to go with indifference.

The object of the meeting was a simple one. It was to afford Aytoun an opportunity for putting an effectual bar between Mr Smith and Helen. Sir George Lorrimer's presence was indispensable, for Sir George, when appealed to, would be unable to deny what was to be alleged—nay, he would be forced to yield his testimony to the truth of the statements.

But the addition of Lord Sauffrenden and Philip Wellwood to the party was beyond what could have been hoped for.

He almost shook with satisfaction. He trembled lest the delicious cup should by any chance slip through his fingers. He counted the half-hours of the day.

"One of papa's friends indeed, Miss Helen! I wish you may not repent having one of papa's friends for one of your enemies!"

Of all her taunts, this had rankled in his bosom deepest.

Thus it was that our dear, good, humble-minded friend, who fancied himself the solitary keeper of his secret, and was doing his best to crush it out of his heart, and hide it out of his sight, was all at once in the company of three other men, each of whom knew something of the same, and not one of whom knew the truth.

The dinner passed off as well as could have been expected. The host, although he scolded and scowled at the attendants, smoothed his brow, and oiled his tongue, ere he addressed any of his guests.

The early delicacies of the season were set before

them, and had it not been for the company of their entertainer, the other four might have enjoyed themselves very comfortably.

Lord Sauffrenden indeed did his best to show disapprobation as he shook hands with Mr Smith, and even walked round to the other side of the table to avoid sitting next him. But then Sauffrenden's disapprobation was always so mild, that it might well be doubted if it was observable to any one but himself. Captain Wellwood certainly did not second him.

He had never been hearty in his reprobation of the culprit, and an imaginative person might have conjectured that he was almost too well inclined to be lenient. He warmly welcomed his neighbour home to Old England again, and hoped they should soon have him back at the Hill. Sauffrenden frowned at such mistimed, superfluous cordiality.

It was not till the wine had circulated twice that Colonel Aytoun thought his time had come.

They were none of them drinkers; temperance was one of his own few virtues, therefore they would not sit long. Sooner, however, it would not have been wise to begin.

His cheek slightly flushed when the pause came for which he had been waiting, but no one would have suspected the effort with which that jaunty tone began.

"By the way, Smith," said he, "you left a sad reputation behind you among the good folks down at your place, when I was there at Christmas. Whew! They were all up in arms. A hornet's nest. Really, you know, it is time for you and me to be giving up these little amusements. It's all very well when one is young, but you gay bachelors never know when to stop."

"He's going to catch it now," thought Sauffrenden, deeply interested. "Serves him right! I'm glad I came!"

Mr Smith inquired what the reputation was that he had left. His thoughts reverted to Miss Fulton, hints about the Admiral having already reached his ear. He was annoyed, but not discomposed. He did the lady justice, she had never thought of him.

"You disclaim it, eh?" continued the Colonel, jocosely as before. "But that's of course. There she is, you know, drooping away; never left her room since you deserted her, and only whispering to her

very, very intimate friends how shamefully she has been treated; and how she feels she can never have the heart to leave her chamber again; never go out to see that beautiful place, that fine house that she had set her soul on being the mistress of!"

"You are still talking in enigmas, Colonel. The only lady who has been confined to the house since I left—at least, so I was sorry to hear from Sir George—is Miss Tolleton. Her sprained ankle has been a more serious affair than any one would have dreamt of."

"He's in for it now!" chuckled Sauffrenden, again. "I'm glad I came!"

"So it's a sprained ankle!" replied Aytoun, lifting his eyebrows. "Ah! Never heard it called by that name before."

"I hope," said Mr Smith to Philip, "that it is well by this time?"

"Oh yes. That's to say, she can't get off the sofa yet, the doctor says. Great stuff, you know."

"The whole thing, of course," said Colonel Aytoun, "we know better, don't we, Smith? What's a sprained ankle to the loss of ten thousand a-year?"

"Coarse brute!" thought Sauffrenden, disgusted. "I'm sorry I came."

"Miss Tolleton," said Mr Smith, trying to speak unremarkably, "is so far above such insinuations, that Colonel Aytoun can be only in jest, but it is safest not to jest with a lady's name."

"In jest! Never was more serious in my life!" cried he, with an air of protesting. "It's the talk of the neighbourhood; and some say, though of course that *we* don't give in to, that a certain good friend of ours did not behave exactly as he ought on the occasion."

"The talk of the neighbourhood, Colonel Aytoun, is very often merely the talk of the person recounting it."

"Well hit!" murmured Sauffrenden. "Glad I——"

"Well, if you won't believe me, ask any one here. I heard it all when I was down there, and I am much mistaken if some of the present company could not tell us more of the matter if they chose. She swears she will have you yet, when her courage is high; and falls to tears and despair, and all the cruel treatment story, when her spirits fail. By

Jove, man! why won't you have her? There she is, wooed and won! A ripe pear ready to fall into your mouth. Open it, and be thankful! It will shut hers, at least. She might rate at you, like the rest of them, every hour of the day, for some misdemeanour or other, but at all events she couldn't accuse you of the unpardonable sin, the capital crime, of being insensible to her charms. And in truth, my friend, when I come to think of it, perhaps you did give her some cause to complain. Perhaps you were rather often found at her front door. Eh? Wasn't it so? Ha! ha! Sly! sly! Too bad! And it wasn't the first time, more's the pity. Poor girl! she has had her disappointments before. That makes it all the harder to be borne. Well, I——beg your pardon?" to Sir George Lorrimer.

"I did not speak," said Sir George, gravely. He had uttered an inarticulate expression of disgust.

"You think her to blame, perhaps? Oh, we should be lenient on a sweet creature like that. Perhaps she was a little indiscreet, a little too lavish of her attractions in old days, but that's all past and forgotten. No one remembers anything of

that now, Smith. Don't you be afraid; don't be put off for a trifle. We know how to keep old stories quiet at the Abbey, don't we?"

The double meaning, the smile of old, old malignity and triumph, thoroughly were they understood by one present.

Nobody interrupted, nobody crossed his foul path; on he went.

"It is all very well, you know, a little mild flirtation, if it can't be misinterpreted; but you gay Lotharios, you marketable articles, should remember that there is more expected from you. You should be on your guard. No giving rise to false hopes; no, no."

Colonel Aytoun was no nice observer. He thought that on his victim's stony face he read the stupor of despair. He had had his swing. He had said nearly all he had to say. What now remained for him was a simple business enough; he had his witnesses ready, in case the prosecution were resisted.

With one accord they had all held their tongues.

Sauffrenden was by turns glad he had come and sorry he had come, but the grossness of thought and language in which the charge was made, at length

weighed the scales too heavily down on one side for them ever to rise again. He was shocked to the last degree. He stared into Aytoun's inflamed eyes as if he were a wild beast come for him to see. He turned to Mr Smith, and saw with a throb of delight that he was about to speak.

"And by George!" he murmured to himself, "he looks dangerous."

Mr Smith began. "This has been a very entertaining rodomontade, Colonel Aytoun. The brilliancy of your fancy—*hold your tongue*, sir!" suddenly roared he, springing to his feet. "Do you dare to insinuate that you have mingled any earnest with your—your most amusing jest?"

"On the contrary, my friend, I have not mingled one atom of jest with my earnest.. It is all earnest, sober earnest——"

"You—infernal—liar!" said Mr Smith, slowly.

"Oh fie! What would the fair Helen think if she heard that! From such a respectable, religious——"

"Religious! You polluting——"

"No more names, please. We make allowance for a little blowing off the steam at first. But a friendly

hint like this—if you don't believe me, ask these gentlemen."

How he blessed his luck which had sent them in his way!

With an evident effort the other mastered himself.

"Am I to understand," he said, in a suppressed voice, "that there is any one here who has concurred in the—the sentiments, the slanders which have just been forced upon us?"

An uneasy silence—downcast eyes. He looked from one to the other.

"Tell him, Lorrimer," said Aytoun, blandly, "what you thought on that happy occasion when you took luncheon with the lady."

"I think now, sir," replied Sir George, warmly, "that you are grossly misinterpreting and exaggerating anything I may have said to you on the subject."

"Without the least intention, then, I assure you. But you are here to speak for yourself. Will you kindly tell our somewhat hasty friend your own opinion? I think, on the whole, it is not unlike mine in substance."

Sir George was now looked at by all; and the afternoon at Sauffrenden rose distinctly before the minds of two, at least, present.

"I will own," he said, hesitatingly, "that I thought Miss Tolleton not disinclined to my friend; nor, to be plain, did I think him altogether disinclined to her."

"You thought she wanted to catch him?"

"I never think such things, sir," said Sir George, haughtily.

"Not in those words, perhaps," rejoined Colonel Aytoun, slightly taken aback; "but it amounts to the same."

Sir George set his lips, and his friend's face changed. "If you wish for further confirmation," continued Aytoun, triumphantly, "here are Lord Sauffrenden and Captain Wellwood."

"I—I have *nothing* to say, sir," interposed Sauffrenden, hastily. "I have the—the highest regard for Miss Tolleton."

"Another?" said Colonel Aytoun, with mild surprise. "She is a most successful young lady, certainly. I had no idea Helen numbered Lord Sauffrenden among her admirers."

"She will number me among her defenders, Colonel Aytoun, and that is sufficient."

"Ah! it's a pity your wife won't call on her, then."

"There is a—a misunderstanding——"

"Exactly; so there is with mine. Little Nelly and I were great friends at the Abbey, but I could never bring Mrs Aytoun to speak to her."

"Colonel Aytoun is acting the part of a friend, is he not?" said a new voice. Philip could keep silence no longer.

"You too have been honoured in that way in your day, I have no doubt." Aytoun turned, quick as thought, upon him. "Most of us have had our day. It is Smith's day now."

"Colonel Aytoun" (none of them called him Aytoun), "you speak like the scoundrel you are——"

"No, no, Smith, I really cannot——"

"Do you dare to interrupt me, sir? You *shall* hear me. I know you well. I know what all this means. As if anything *you* say were worth a moment's consideration! As if you could blacken a reputation such as hers with any falsehood you——"

"Falsehood? Ask your friends here. The licence I have granted on account of your being a little put

out, sir, must not be abused any more. I can't have falsehoods spoken about—at any rate, unless you can prove them."

"I can prove them."

"How?" A moment's embarrassment. Colonel Aytoun pursued his advantage.

"You are in too great a hurry. Now, to humour you, as you can't prove it a falsehood, allow me to prove it truth. Appeal to these gentlemen. Ask every one of them if you will, whether or not they believe that she wants to be your wife."

"Do you believe this, Lord Sauffrenden?" said Mr Smith, firmly.

Poor, compassionate, tender-hearted Sauffrenden!

"I did — did think once, — something — of the kind," stammered he; "but indeed——"

"Thank you; that is all I need to know. You, Lorrimer? Captain Wellwood?"

Sir George bowed, and Philip mutely followed his example.

"Then, gentlemen"—they all looked at him, his face was white, his voice trembled—"I must beg your attention to a few words on my part. I will be short. Nothing but what has occurred before you

all could justify me in the course I am about to take. To Colonel Aytoun I do not address myself; from henceforth he and I are strangers. When you know all, you will understand. I love this lady. I love her with my whole heart—ay, with the same heart I gave to Emmeline just twenty years ago. He," pointing with his finger, "robbed me of the one, and now he would fain rob me of the other."

("Good heavens!" ejaculated Sauffrenden, under his breath, "what nuts for Milly!")

"But he is mistaken; this is not to be his delightful office. This tissue of malignity falls harmless; she does not care for me as it is. No, I know what you would say, Colonel Aytoun—it is not *me* but *mine*. Well, you shall see how that is; she shall have me and mine both, if she will!"

Colonel Aytoun started, and changed colour.

"Yes," continued his opponent, letting down his voice again. "But that 'if she will!' Gentlemen, I do not disguise from you that in this hypothesis I have no hope. You are incredulous?" He paused. "Is there no one to do her justice?" Another pause. "She shall have it done, nevertheless. To-morrow evening will see her in possession of all that Colonel

Aytoun affirms she desires, if she will deign to take them. Too well I know what that means. To-morrow evening will rather see me a despised, detested, cast-off, lonely old man." Again the voice trembled, but it still went on.

"One thing more. You hear this from my lips. It is no secret, and not to be kept as one; it is to be told, if ever this slanderous tale should be repeated in your presence. I call on you to bear witness to my words. She may have me if she will."

"Give me your hand, sir!" shouted Sauffrenden, restraining himself no longer, but rushing round the table, and all but clasping the speaker in his arms. "By—by—I must swear or I shall burst—by George! then, you are the noblest, and the best, and—and—I say I can't stand it! I never heard anything like this! If she doesn't take you after it, she is a fool and an idiot, were she ten times the handsomest girl in the county! And—and—I shall be proud of being your friend, sir, if you'll allow me—for I'm sure I don't deserve it—to the latest day of my life!"

"You may well be proud of it, Sauffrenden," said Sir George Lorrimer, smiling, and stretching his hand across the table likewise; "I have been, this

many a day. Ah, you didn't know what he was! Now we must not make too much of him. I hope there is a happier ending in store than he anticipates."

"You too?" said Mr Smith, looking up at him, "*Et tu, Brute?*"

"No, no," said his friend, hastily, "not that. I am converted, believe me. All I mean is, that you are too humble, too modest—you think too little of yourself——"

A gentle shake of the head.

"Well," said Sir George, "we shall see."

And all this time Philip is sitting still as a stone in his chair, his eyes fixed upon the long empty plate.

How was it that, when he lifted them, they looked so blue and shining?

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNEXPECTED QUESTION, AND AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER.

NOTHING took place next morning different from other mornings at Freelands.

Seldom does anything happen to point out the great days of our lives. They come upon us in our ordinary paths, as we go about our accustomed duties, and look upon our familiar faces; and there is no voice to whisper that we shall turn to that date through years and years of time, as the day of our joy, or our sorrow.

It was a somewhat gloomy morning. Helen had slept badly, and breakfasted in bed. The post had only brought a few uninteresting letters, which had been quickly disposed of, and voted scarcely worth answering. Her sisters must go out, go to the village, bring her some lozenges, and some larger

needles, and get the magazines which had been forgotten by the postman.

They were willing to go; and left her, after luncheon, lying on her sofa wearily completing an unfinished piece of worsted work which Carry had declared was really too stupid for her to go on with.

The sisters had been gone nearly an hour, when the door-bell suddenly rang, with a sharp demand; and two minutes afterwards, in walked Mr Smith.

She was not one to be easily startled, but monotony and confinement tend to shake the nerves, and her reception of him was not all that she could have wished.

Her breathing would flutter, and her voice stammer.

She was happy to see him again; hoped some of the others were at home; recollected they were all out; asked where he had been, then blushed for her impropriety, and faltered out instead, a hope that he was well.

Her visitor answered as became him.

His tone was tender, too tender had he not known what lay before him, as he expressed his regret at

finding her still an invalid; and he spoke again and again of the happiness of being once more at East-world.

His travels he dismissed with an air of impatience.

He had felt obliged to go abroad, but it had been for no good, and had afforded him no pleasure.

Might he take his old chair?

It was close to her head, and she had not thought he would take it, but it did not signify. All the past was to be forgotten. He was altered, and the alteration had to do with her. A rough morning suit had replaced his usual almost too carefully good attire, and there was no flower in his button-hole. His gloves—even his face was dusty. His neck-cloth was half pulled out.

This to her eye bore but one interpretation. He no longer cared for the effect he produced in this house. It was the finishing touch to the thrust he had given her. Henceforward they were to stand on a different footing.

She had so well understood it all beforehand, that there was no second disappointment.

She began to talk, quietly indeed, but with ease and fluency. She was glad to see that at least the

old appearance of friendship was to be maintained. It would help greatly to effect that belief in people's minds which they were so anxious to establish, that there never was, and never could have been, anything between her and Mr Smith.

As her spirit returned, his failed.

Here was the opportunity which he had resolved at all risks to obtain, when he set out that afternoon, given him without difficulty, and given him at once.

Now was the time to do his part.

He had said he would do it, and, come what might, he would not fail in his resolution, but oh, how difficult it was!

Five minutes, ten, a quarter of an hour passed, and he was still dallying with her work-table, asking after this and that, putting needless questions, and returning absent answers.

The half-hour struck.

He felt that it *must* come. What should he say? What could he say? He had trusted to the moment, to something coming in his way which he might turn to account.

But nothing had helped him, her own manner least of all.

The precious time was going. Next moment, any moment might bring interruption, her father, her sisters—and the chance would be gone.

With a sense of desperation he laid his hand upon the smooth, slim, white one, whose taper fingers looked so transparent against the dark sofa coverlet.

How thin, how soft they were! Suddenly it struck him that the rings were wanting, and for something to say he remarked so much aloud.

"They are grown too large; they fall off my poor skinny fingers," said she, smiling. And then she began to think that he ought not to hold her hand thus, and made as though she would draw it away.

But, to her amazement, it was held fast, and held between both of his.

He would say it if it choked him!

"If I were to give you one—not too large—to wear—for my sake—would you wear it—and *here?*" touching the third finger. "Hush! Oh, don't speak! I know, I know, that you would not."

He shrank down, bending his head to the blow—only, would God it had fallen, and were over!

Was she struck dumb at his presumption? Was

she hanging back in pity? Or was she merely obeying his request for silence?

Tick, tick, went the clock, and a blast of rain spattered against the window. One long, long minute passed.

She would not speak, and he must leave it as it was.

Was this to be his answer? So, he must yield up the dear possession that he held, and feel the sacrifice complete.

He drew himself up to go. Yet one word more. He thought it would be better, would really be better, and then all would be plain between them, and he need never trouble her more.

"Dear lady," he said, softly, "I know the pain it will give you to say it, but if it must be 'No,' the 'No' would be better said. I can bear the worst now. You need not fear that I—that you—that I will ever molest you. Once with me means for altogether. Say then, is it 'No'?"

Not a word said she.

"Then take your hand from mine," and he unclasped it gently.

The hand remained where it was.

He began to tremble. "Helen, what does this mean? What are you doing? Are you deceiving yourself, or me?"

His voice grew harsh and sharp. "Say No, *no*, NO, and seal my fate at once, but do not trifle with me, in the name of heaven!"

Her lips moved, but he could catch no sound. He turned, the tears were raining down her cheek.

"Child, can it be 'Yes'?"

"Yes."

His head fell down upon his hands, hers dropped from between them.

It might have been at that instant, or it might have been some minutes after, that voices, footsteps, bustle, was heard in the hall.

The walking party had returned. With an incoherent exclamation he rushed out among them, and passed by. They, flying to her for an explanation, found her crying.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MIRAGE.

"Oh, it's delightful, delightful!" exclaimed Lily, for the twentieth time that evening, as she seated herself at the tea-table, alone with her eldest sister. "To think of its all coming right at last, as I said it would. Not that I ever thought it! I felt as sure it was all over as I ever did of anything in my life. And it was all a mistake from beginning to end! We shall find out what it was, some day. Colonel Aytoun at the bottom of it, I dare swear. I should like to see your face now, Mr Colonel! You ought to have a special invitation to the wedding. Oh! and Helen, nothing could be better than the way he has done it, after all. His disappearing, turning up in this fashion, taking us all by surprise, I declare it is quite romantic! And Nelly," she rattled on, "don't you see how lucky it is that we

have none of us even seen him, except you? *That* will speak for itself. No one will have a word to say; the Hunts even, cannot accuse you. The dear, delightful man, I love him already; and 'All's well that ends well' shall be my motto to the end of my life!"

Helen made no attempt to check her rapture. It did not suit her, it jarred upon her, and she would fain have turned a deaf ear, if she could. But, not in this supreme moment of gratification, was she one to damp the sympathy of those around her.

She had borne the turn of Fortune well. She had so changed since that afternoon when, in the intoxication of anticipated triumph, she had revelled in the discomfiture of those who had tried to snatch from her the prize, that it was not till Lily recalled them to her memory, that she gave them so much as a thought.

Her heart glowed with happiness.

A new spring of life seemed within her. The world shone.

She could not work, she could not eat, she could not talk. She could but lie quiet thinking over it

all, with her eyes still hot, but sparkling softly; wondering at herself and at him.

"We heard of his arrival," Lily had narrated, "as soon as we got to the Hunts. They had seen him. Mrs Hunt had seen him pass the Bains' window; and after we left them his man came flying down to the village—I suppose to get some things. The other, the butler, or whatever he may be, took up the luggage, the Hunts said. They had evidently been watching like cats; for Mrs Hunt said that, from everything she could see, he had arrived unexpectedly. She was too much excited even to make a decent appearance of hiding it. Well, directly she said that, my heart jumped, for I thought, 'He has come after Nelly!' So we forgot all about the magazines, and came home as fast as we could to tell you, when, whom should we encounter in the hall but the man himself! Fortunately I had got your needles though, but I daresay you will do no more work to-night!"

"Did he speak to you?" inquired her sister.

"Not a word. He ran by like a ghost, and I thought he had gone crazy, or else that we had. The apparition was rather startling, you must allow. Then it darted into my head that he had been

with you, and I guessed the whole. Is he coming here to-morrow?"

Helen supposed he was, but smiled as she owned she really could not tell. Their coming home had been unfortunately premature. He had left her in a fright.

"So much the better," said Lily, cheerfully; "we shall see him all the sooner back again. Now then, don't you want your tea?"

"Yes, I do." She drew in her chair.

"You have been able to sit up to tea a week, and to dinner two days," said Lily. "I daresay you will get on fast now. We must ask Dr Hunt about the drive; there will be no difficulty about carriages now," archly.

Helen smiled again, and sipped her tea. "I really am getting hungry. If you will ring the bell, I'll ask for some toast, I think. Tea and toast is my favourite combination."

Corker brought the toast, and with it a letter. The bearer, he said, was to wait and see if there was any answer.

"Is it from him?" said Lily, in a loud whisper, as the door closed.

"Hush! Yes. Now, be quiet, and don't speak till I have read it. Go and tell papa tea is ready, and then I shall have peace."

She threw herself back in the arm-chair. Lily did not go, but as she held her tongue, she considered she had done what was required of her. It would have been too much to have given up the gratification of watching Nelly's face.

The letter ran thus:—

"When I spoke to you this afternoon, my dear young lady, I took you, I fear, too much by surprise. That it is probable you had no suspicion whatever of my feelings beforehand, I am but too well aware; and I cannot help tormenting myself with the doubt whether, had you had time for reflection, you would have given me the too, too kind answer you did. If I should be thus found taking an unfair advantage, all my present happiness would vanish. And if you should, under a false idea that anything in your previous behaviour compelled you to yield, have spoken what you would willingly retract, I should never forgive myself, unless I gave you the chance of doing so. You never gave me the slightest reason to imagine you had any warmer feeling for me than

that of friendship, and I can hardly yet believe that you pardon my presumptuous folly in supposing so. Yet if it is, if it can be as I dare to hope, say so again. Then, and not till then, will my mind be at rest. My dear, think it over *well* before you decide." ("Bless the man—three sheets!" ejaculated Lily, under her breath.) Helen turned to the third.

"My man will wait to receive an answer. If he brings me word that one will be sent, I shall remain here awaiting it. If, however, during the hours that have elapsed since I left you, no misgivings have entered your mind, and it is made up now, as then, say that there is 'no answer,' and when next I come, I hope to place on your finger the ring you thought you could wear for my sake. In that case I shall not be with you till to-morrow evening, as I must go to town and choose it myself. J. S."

There was no ending beyond the simple initials of his name; he had found it too difficult to make one.

Helen read the whole slowly, then rose without deliberation, and rang the bell.

"I would have rung for you," said Lily; "you need not have got up."

"Never mind, thank you. Corker, please say there is no answer."

"Yes, Miss."

"No answer, remember."

"Yes, Miss," resentfully.

"That's emphatic," remarked Lily. "It is all right, I suppose?"

"All right; as right as it can be. What a man he is! I am proud of him, Lily, I can tell you. It will be no marriage for money, whatever may be said."

"Well, you would hardly have married him *without*," reflected her sister.

"That is another question. He does not marry me for my eyes, or my nose, or my mouth, but I doubt whether he would have married me had I been without any one of them."

"But perhaps he does marry you for one of them!"

"Tuts! Take some one else, then. Mrs Rodney, what a little pug nose she has! no one could say her Arthur married her for it; but if she had been without one at all, she might never have been his wife."

Helen mused a moment, and went on soberly.

"I believe there are more matches of this sort than people think. If a man or a woman is young and rather good-looking, and there is only a nice small fortune, it is kept altogether in the background. Every one calls it a love-match, and the he or she on whose side the money is not, is applauded up to the skies. Of course it is all right. They *can't* marry without money, and so they must only think of those who have it. And they may be very happy together, and very fond of each other too. But why, only because there happens to be more money, there should be supposed to be less love, or no love at all, I can't see. I believe there will be as much affection between Mr Smith and me, as between half the couples in the world."

"There will be plenty on his side, no doubt," said Lily, affectionately. Her love for this sister was her redeeming point.

"You must give over calling him Mr Smith now," added she, laughing. "What is it to be? John? I think I hear you. I know how it will be. 'John says this,' and 'John thinks that,' in the true matrimonial style. A pretty life you'll lead your John, poor man! He little thinks what is before him.

He'll be carried about everywhere like a tame cat."

"He'll be nothing of the sort," said Helen, indignantly. "I hope I know better how to keep up a husband's dignity. I am much mistaken if he does not know better too. There is nothing of the tame cat about him."

"I wouldn't keep him then, my dear," said her father, who had entered in time to hear the last sentence. "It is not safe. I did not like his look at all the day we were there. There was a ferocious glare in his eyes, and he showed his teeth——"

"Who are you talking about, papa?" cried his daughters.

"Not the person we were, I am sure," added Helen.

"Person? Oh, I thought you said a cat. I thought you and Lily were talking about that nasty black cat up at the Hill. I wonder Smith keeps such a creature."

Mr Tolleton had an aversion to cats.

"They are the ruin of furniture," he continued, "and always getting into the larder."

"I like cats," said Helen; "and that was as

nice a one as I ever saw. It was too clean to harm anything. And I shan't turn against it behind its master's back, as Lily did against Jumper. She had been patting Jumper and making a fuss about him one day when he came with Philip, and I wondered how she could, for his coat was soaking, and he was rubbing it against her nice new muslin, when all of a sudden she pushed him away as hard as she could, calling him an abominable creature for spoiling her dress! It turned out that Philip had left the room."

"I remember," said Lily. "I can't help laughing myself when I think of it. The mark of his horrid feet, and his face of utter astonishment! He has distrusted me ever since."

"I wonder what Philip will say when he hears of this," said Carry, who had been in the room for some time, but had not spoken before. "Do you think he will be surprised?"

"*I* don't," said Lily.

Helen did not answer.

"What if they should meet here to-morrow?" continued Carry.

"Mr Smith is not coming till the evening,"

said her sister. "Now, can any of you guess why?"

Guesses were made, but the truth was not approached. She had the pleasure of surprising them all thoroughly.

"The engagement ring!" cried Lily. "Oh, well done he! Isn't it jolly? Doesn't it bring it all so near? To think that only last night we were sitting round this table just as we are now, all so humdrum and so slow, and dreaming of nothing less than this! Do you remember, Nelly, you were talking of getting those mauve skirts turned for the summer, and how we could contrive bunches out of the unnecessary breadths? Carry and I will divide your skirt between us now, and have bunches to any extent. What a scramble we shall have for your clothes, and what a *trousseau* you will have!"

"Shall you need a very large one, my dear?" inquired her father, anxiously. "There is not too much money, you know."

"I had not thought about it yet, papa. But I certainly don't mean to spend much money. It will be far better to have few things, and good of their kind, than a great variety."

"Yes, and all the boots and shoes, and things of that sort, can be filled in afterwards, except what are wanted for actual use," said Lily. "There will be no need to go in for those heaps of underclothing that Sarah Gray had. Her mother said as she was marrying a poor man it was better to fit her out in that way, than to give her silk dresses."

"She had one or two very nice silks," said Helen. "I thought Mrs Gray very sensible about it. She gave her just what she wanted, and what she could really wear. It would have been nonsense to load her with useless finery."

"Well, but you aren't going to be an East End curate's wife."

"No, and of course that makes the difference. I shall be able to afford underclothing whenever I want it, and I must have a few more gowns. But I mean to take a hint from Mrs Gray in this. I shall get what will be useful for me, and do without all that is unnecessary, as Sarah did. And I mean to take care of your money too, papa."

"You were always the best of girls in that way, my dear. I wish we may get on as well without you!" And he sighed.

I'm going such a little way off," said Helen, cheerfully, "that you will hardly miss me. I could not well have come closer, unless I had eloped with the new steward at Sauffrenden."

"Ah, I wonder what the Sauffrendens will say!" said Lily.

"They have no say in the matter," replied her father, with asperity,

Helen smiled. "Perhaps they will be friends with us now, papa."

"Humph! They used us very ill, that's all I can say. I meet Lord Sauffrenden constantly, and he never takes the slightest notice of me, though I see him speaking to every one else in the village."

"He can hardly speak to you as a villager."

"He ought to speak to me as a gentleman."

"Oh, well, it is an old story, papa. They did not want to know us, and took the only way they could. There is no need to rake it up now. I should not be the least surprised if they come forward at last."

"Why should they come forward now? It is too late. I went to call, called at once, the very day after they came. No one could have been more attentive,

and that was how they received it! Rude was not the word. It was——"

"I wonder what the ring will be!" Helen changed the conversation.

"Diamonds, of course," said Lily.

"Yes, diamonds, I daresay. I must confess I shall enjoy showing that diamond ring to Mrs Hunt."

"She has not been nice," said Carry, in the tone of a judge summing up.

"She never is," said Lily.

"As if he ever would have thought of Maria!"

"Carry thinks he would much sooner have thought of her."

"I did not think anything of the sort," retorted Carry, sharply. "I was thinking of Mrs Hunt."

The truth was that she had gone alone to the Hunts, not long after Mr Smith's departure, and just at the time when the misgivings of husband and wife were making them very uneasy. Mrs Hunt had been overjoyed to catch the simple one of the Tolletons alone. A thorough cross-examination had been gone through, and too openly.

Carry had seen through it, and done wonders.

Even her sisters had complimented her afterwards: and ever since, she had plumed herself upon the interview, and retained an acute impression that Mrs Hunt had not been nice.

The Fultons were next discussed at the tea-table. Helen, as she had always done, did Miss Fulton justice. No, it was not Cornelia; it was the Admiral. The Admiral would find himself in the wrong boat now.

"I never did like the Admiral," said Mr Tolleton, candidly. "He was always very bad to me."

"They were quite friendly at one time," said Lily; "but of late they have been drawing back more and more — I am sure I don't know why. I suppose we don't suit their old-fashioned notions. Perhaps, Nelly, if the Sauffrendens come forward, we may see them too."

"Old-fashioned notions are sometimes the best," said Helen, gravely. "We have been wild girls, we three, but when I turn chaperone I hope to see you both sober down too."

Carry looked pleased at the idea of her needing to sober down.

She was always afraid of being thought sensible.

"You have been sobering down yourself for some time," said Lily. "Don't get any soberer, or you will send me off in the other direction."

"I should be sorry to do that."

Lily looked at her sister.

"I don't know what has come over Helen, but the mantle of Mrs Smith seems already to have fallen on Miss Tolleton. It is he who has done it, I know," discontentedly.

"Perhaps it is," said Helen. "Never mind, Lily, you won't quarrel with me if I look sober in diamonds."

Lily's spirits were restored in a moment, and the evening closed happily to all.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OUR FRIENDS' DISAPPOINTMENTS.

"MRS HUNT'S in a fine fuss about Mr Smith's coming back," said Miss Bain to Lyddy, as the two old maids sat together over their sewing. "I'll tell you what, Lyddy, there are some people who think all their geese are swans, and a swan would be an ornamental creature at the house on the Hill! He! he! he!" she finished off with a little cackle.

Lyddy stared at her sister, and tried to cackle likewise; but she had not caught the meaning of the allegory.

"Is Mrs Hunt so fond of Mr Smith, sister?"

"So fond of him, Lyddy, that she would do anything in the world for him. She even wants to find him a better wife than Cornelia Fulton."

"Goodness, 'Melia, not one of us!"

"No, indeed; I hope our behaviour would put a

stop to any ideas of that kind," said 'Melia, with dignity. "No one can say that you or I ran after him. Besides, for all his name is Smith, and nobody knows who or what his grandfather was, he is too fine a gentleman to be evened to us, Lyddy. He's for our betters, you know. It is the young ladies who are pulling caps for him. Now, can't you guess?"

Lyddy couldn't guess, and deprecated with an appealing glance her sister's contempt.

"Well, then, you are a dull thing!" said 'Melia. "Any one with half an eye could see that Mrs Hunt wants him for one of her girls!"

"'Melia! No!"

"Ay or no, that's what she does. Why, this afternoon she showed it so plain, that I had it on the tip of my tongue to say, 'Dear me, Mrs Hunt, he's all but engaged to Miss Cornelia!' Not that he is, you know, but just to see how she would take it. What a stir she made when she saw him pass the window! and it was, 'Oh! there's Mr Smith!!'" (dropping her work, and giving a lively representation of the scene.) "'There's Mr Smith!!' cries she. 'Indeed! and what may Mr Smith be to you?' thinks I. But

you see I never said a whisht, and on she ran about him,—where he had been, how long he had been away, and what could have brought him back so sudden. 'And the girls will be pleased!' says she. 'Oho!' thinks I, then, 'the *girls* will be pleased, will they? So that's the story, is it? Then I think I know what it all means, mistress.' But you see, Lyddy, there are two words to that bargain, and maybe Mr Smith's word may be long of coming."

"Dear me!" cried Lyddy, enthusiastically; "he might do a deal worse. Nice young things, though not precisely handsome; and living close by. She would be under her mother's eye all the time. It would really be a most suitable connection."

"That's all you know about it, Lyddy. If I were Mr Smith, I know whether I should like to have her mother's eye upon me all the time! And as to his ever thinking of one of those slip-shod girls——if he is thinking of anybody, it's Helen Tolleton!"

"Sister! Helen Tolleton!"

The tone of amazement, remonstrance, reproach! Lyddy's faith in her sister was shaking.

"Ay, Helen Tolleton; just her, and no one else."

In 'Melia's tone leaked out nothing but unmitigated enjoyment.

"Mark my words, if he marries at all, it won't be till after he has asked her."

"Sister! But do you think he will marry her, then?"

"I can't tell Lyddy—I can't tell whether or no she would have him; but worse boats than that have come to land. Now I have a notion that this has more to do with his coming back than other folks fancy," added she, mysteriously.

Lyddy pondered.

"What set you thinking of it?" said she at last.

"I had a suspicion that night of the feast."

"And you never told me!" with a note of complaint.

"Where were your eyes not to see it for yourself? But I didn't want to have it said about that we had set it going. The next thing would have been, that we were after him ourselves."

"I would never have set it going, I'm sure," murmured Lyddy. "What was it you saw that night?"

"You know she was behind in the pantry. Well, he was always poking about there, though he didn't go

in; but I must confess that this only came to me after I had seen him speaking to her."

"I thought he never spoke to her at all."

"Ah! did he not? I think he did, though. When no one was looking. And I know where he sat when the magic-lantern was going on, though Mrs Hunt doesn't. But if I had never thought a thought about it, I should have found him out by the way he looked at her at supper."

"Well, you *are* sharp! To think of noticing all that! Why, I had enough ado to keep my tongue going, and do justice to all the good things besides. I never thought of Mr Smith nor his looks, not I. Except—well, yes—for a moment, when I could not take the two jellies, and I'm sure he thought it rude. But I really was afraid. One can't take everything, when the dishes never seem to end—but you do notice things in a wonderful way. And so he was looking at her at supper, was he?"

"His eyes were just fixed upon her from beginning to end."

"It would never do, sister."

"Why not, Lyddy?"

Lyddy shook her head.

"It may have to do, whether or no. Who's to help its doing? It's not for you or me to say. They must 'gang their ain gait,' as father used to tell us. Time was when the Tolletons held their heads with the highest, little though they are thought of now."

"Like ourselves, sister," with gentle melancholy. "If it weren't for the caddy and the old mull, I would sometimes forget we ever belonged to the Macbains. However," continued she, in a brisker tone, "that's neither here nor there. We have many mercies and ought to be thankful. I never thought to see that grease-spot come out of the tartan. Mrs Hunt was really most good-natured. And so you think Mr Smith will marry Helen Tolleton?"

"Na!" ejaculated Miss Bain, quickly, "I never said that; nobody can go that length. But I'll tell you who he won't marry, and that's Maria Hunt."

"Dear me, sister! That will be a sad disappointment."

"Like enough, Lyddy, but disappointments come to all. People shouldn't count their chickens before they are hatched!"

Thus lightly do we take the disappointments of our friends.

For sorrows, sufferings, and losses, we have sympathy, but why should we bewail disappointments? They are the lot of the aspiring; the fall of the high-minded; the offspring of presumption; the result of unreason; the corrective medicine after unwholesome food. Bitter may be the draught, but happy those to whom it is administered in due season.

Ah, but when it comes nigh us! When we writhe under the merciless stroke, the unsparing scythe that sweeps our schemes in sunder!

Is it nothing, then, to know that the easy assent which we gave before, it is the turn of others to give now?

Does this cause no fresh bleeding of the wound? Down in the shades of the Valley of Humiliation we can still tell what eyes are watching us, or not.

Helen Tolleton, in her great disappointment, had felt that if she were spared this, she could bear the rest.

She knew what sort of eyes would have looked down on her; cold, cruel, exulting, rudely familiar eyes. She saw them many a night in her dreams.

And now at last they vanished.

All through the hours of that long, light, flickering night which followed the eventful day, Helen lay awake.

She did not want to sleep. She was not restless. She was willing to lie still with her face turned to the window, looking out.

The clear serene heavens, the pale shadow of the moon on the garden pond, the hush, the calm over the land, were all in harmony with the peace which filled her soul. She felt a swell of thanksgiving.

Anew she planned the life that was before her; the easy, happy, good life.

Old shifts, and tricks, and stories thrown behind her; new graces, beauties, accomplishments, and adornments, hers.

It was impossible to cheat her fancy of its flights.

At length daylight broke, and sleep followed; and though filled by dreams fabling the truth, or distorting it into fantastic forms and shapes, still the sun was high in the heavens ere she unclosed her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"OH, MY LORD, HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS?"

April fool's day. Not a breath of wind to stir the larches; not a passing cloud to darken even with April tear-drops. Birds jubilant in the woodlands. Budding hedgerows, primroses, violets over all the land. Sweet scents and sweet sounds. Sweet old England on a day like this!

Down stepped Lord Sauffrenden through the village with an elastic tread. All the world was right with him again. He had just arrived from London, prospered in his ways; and now had the dear delight in store of narrating to his wife, his friends, and the public generally (in confidence), the particulars of Colonel Aytoun's dinner-party.

All day before, he had been bursting with the intelligence. He had had no one to confide in. Philip had gone off somewhere, and he had been

forced to remain in town. He was aching with desire for a listener, and a listener was now at hand; for Milly, whatever she might pretend, would enjoy the scene to his heart's content.

Nevertheless, as he passed the post-office door, he yielded a few minutes to turn aside and inquire for his letters. The evening post was in. His own bag would convey them to the Castle half an hour after his arrival; but what idle man likes to wait half an hour for his letters? Great men, busy men, hard-worked men, are fain to get away from the penny post; men who do nothing, never.

To Sauffrenden it was often the event of the day.

Was this why he was so often found in the little shop? Not altogether. He learnt a great deal there. He saw strangers; he heard talk. He loved to linger, sit down, chat, and look about him. He loved to feel he was welcome.

Welcome he was. They would not have known the place without him. Everything fresh was laid aside for his inspection. Every scrap of news served up, as it were hot, between plates.

The Hunts from their windows were his respectful

watchers. Dr Hunt, so soon as he saw the grey shooting clothes disappear among the newspapers, would put himself in the way. Mr Rodney would sigh his very, very mildest sigh over so much wasted time. Mr Bartlett growl his faintest growl at the affront to the bank.

For they all liked him; they all cherished him. He was one of themselves; a father, husband, brother, son of the soil.

"Oh, my lord, have you heard the news?"

The postmaster knew he would call; had been waiting for him; would not have missed being the one to tell him first, for the world.

"Aha! it's out already!" thought Sauffrenden, beaming all over. "No, Fletcher, I have heard nothing. I have been away. Just come down by the 7.10."

"Indeed, my lord! You have heard nothing, then?"

"No; but I own there is something I should not be surprised to hear. I suspect it's that, eh? Mr Smith?"

"It is indeed, my lord," solemnly.

"You did not look for him so soon back among you?"

"No, indeed, my lord," still more solemnly. "And then this to follow!" added Fletcher, moralising.

"Why, man, you look as if it were his funeral. I think Mr Smith's friends have every reason to congratulate him."

"My lord!"

"I do, indeed. Why not?"

"Your lordship surely does not understand——"

"Perfectly, I assure you, and what is more, I approve."

The postmaster rubbed his head in perplexity. "It only happened this afternoon," he said, wistfully.

"Just when I expected that it would happen; either to-day or yesterday at least. I thought he said yesterday" (*sotto voce*). Aloud, "Come, tell me what you have against it? What do you pull such a long face about? eh?"

"We shall miss Mr Smith very greatly, my lord. He hasn't been long here, and we didn't care very much about him when he comed. But there's nobody on the ground, you and my lady of course excepted, that's grown to be more thought on."

"Well, so he ought to be. But you are not going to lose him?"

"We *have* lost him, my lord."

The postmaster stared at Lord Sauffrenden, who stared still more at him.

"Lost him! How have you lost him?" He could not make it out.

"The news is just come in, my lord; I thought as how you could hardly have heard it. Mr Smith is dead!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

NO HOPE.

Mr Smith was dead, and within an hour of his death there was scarcely a man or woman in East-world who did not know of it.

It came upon them like a thunder-clap.

They did not want him when he came, as the post-master said, but they knew what he was when he was gone.

His praises were in every mouth. It seemed as though, when living, he had possessed but half his virtues; and dead, the other half had been supplied him.

He was dead! He had been alive in the morning, and at noonday; and when even came, he was *dead!*

They talked of him in the past tense. They whispered of what he had been. He was no longer present with them; he was no longer one of them. He was dead.

Strange! Awful! Terrible! The commonplace words resounded in every dwelling.

When had it been? Where? How? Who had been with him? Who had seen him?

Was it true? Was it certain?

Alas! it was too true, too certain. The words were yet upon their lips when another and another messenger confirmed the tale.

There had been no warning, no alarm. Not the gentlest note of preparation had sounded in his ears. He had been alive and well at five o'clock, and before seven he was gone.

Of course they had come for the doctor. But the doctor had returned home confounded, and sad at heart. It was all over. His remaining could be of no use. And by that time every one knew.

Lord Sauffrenden conveyed the news to his wife with a look almost of despair.

The Fultons refused to believe.

And at one house in the neighbourhood there was neither weeping nor wailing, neither question nor answer, but a great, cold, silent blank.

It was as though the bitter cup were to be twice drunk.

As a dream within a dream is first broken, leaving the dreamer happy still, because he fancies at least it is no illusion now—so had she been dreaming on.

Her first vision had been rudely dispelled. She believed she had awoke to reality. Alas! the second proved the more transitory phantasm of the two.

Slight, slight as the hope had been at the first awakening, it was hope indeed compared with this. "In the grave," saith the Scripture, "there is no hope;" no change, no return, no appeal, no reversion.

The sheaf was ripe for the sickle, and the sickle had cut it down.

At last small particulars began to creep out.

Mr Smith had been up to town again. He had stayed there only a few hours. He had returned by the five o'clock train, ordered his dinner an hour earlier than usual, and stated that he was going out in the evening.

The servants were of opinion that he had never seemed in better health or spirits.

After giving his orders he had gone to his room to dress.

John had taken him hot water, and remarked that he poured some out for shaving, which he never did at that hour, unless he were going into company.

He had reiterated injunctions that his dinner should on no account be later than six, and John had come down and told the cook; and the cook had been very cross when, at six o'clock punctually, she had sent in the soup, and a quarter of an hour afterwards her master had not come out of his room.

She had cried out about people talking to her of being in time, who had never been late in her life, and then keeping her fish on the fire till all the juice was like to be out of them—and at last John had gone up and tapped at the bedroom door.

The tap had been unresponded to, and he had tapped till he was tired.

At length he had peeped into the room. Not seeing any one, he had concluded that his master had stepped out; and was turning back to the door, when his eye fell on Mr Smith fallen down all in a heap, between the washing-stand and the bed.

He had tried directly to raise him, though greatly terrified, never having seen any one in a fit before. He didn't know whether they went cold in fits or

not, but thought by his master's face he must be pretty bad.

He had called for help, but couldn't make any of the others hear.

He had got him on to the bed, and run down to fetch the rest.

The cook had said—or else it was Martha—none of them could rightly remember who had said it, but at any rate they had all felt it, felt sure in a moment that it wasn't like any fit they had ever seen.

Mr Bowling and John, however, had unloosed his things; and cook had rubbed his feet with pepper and vinegar; and Martha had burnt feathers under his nose.

Then John had run off for the doctor, and they had all lost a good master and a kind friend.

Such was the household evidence.

As a supplement, they produced from the waistcoat-pocket a jeweller's box containing a lady's diamond ring.

Dr Hunt listened decorously and sadly to the end; but when he saw the ring, he started.

Ha! what was this? Whose ring was that? His hand fell to his side. His spirit went from him.

Then with a long, deep breath came reflection.

That ring told a tale. Those diamonds would never have been Maria's. If not Maria's, whose? Helen Tolleton's.

He felt as certain of it as if he had seen them gleaming on her finger.

To think of this having been in store for him.

He had had a vision of it, it is true; a foreboding, an ugly dream. He had seen Mr Smith's face giving the message at his door, in his nightmares.

But dreams do not always, do not often, come to pass. Weeks had gone by. His suspicions had been lulled; he had slept in security.

On the preceding day the house on the Hill had again received its master, and they were all anxiously awaiting what would follow; his wife in a fever-fret—Maria demurely conscious, ready to welcome change of any sort.

He had a note in his pocket for Mr Smith at the moment he received the summons.

Then came the doubt, the conviction, and the evidence. As he walked home his brain was in a tumult.

He would have said, no doubt, that he was far too much shocked to think. He firmly believed that he

was stunned by such a blow. He had not had time to think of anything.

But the ring was before his eyes all the time, and he knew it, and was ashamed of it.

Was it possible? Absolutely true? Not only coming to this, but come already?

He had a sense, he could not help it, of danger escaped. He felt like a mariner rudely cast ashore, with the breath half beaten out of him—shattered, but safe.

Mrs Hunt, however, was loud in her woe and her lamentations.

Mr Smith! Their dear friend, Mr Smith! Their most particular friend, their nearest neighbour, their —their—she must not say what,—but poor Maria!

Who was to break it to her? How would she ever get over it? Dear, dear! she would feel it terribly. She would—— "The less said about that the better!" exclaims a sour, hard voice. Could it be Robert's?

She is involuntarily impressed. Why so? What does he mean?

"Don't go and make a fool of the girl to people, Polly."

Make a fool of her! How was she making a fool of her? She was doing the very best thing for her she could.

"She will never get over it, Robert."

"Fiddlesticks! She was hard enough to get into it."

"She had got quite fond of him."

"She must get quite fond of some one else, then."

"How can you speak like that, my dear? How can you be so unkind? The poor thing——"

"Now I tell you what it is, Polly, once for all. If you go and blazon it abroad that our girl is dying for love, or any other nonsensical rubbish of that sort, you'll make her the most egregious laughing-stock that ever was. Now, I warn you. I have my reasons."

He was not so unkind as she thought. He wished to spare her.

She waited a minute, then oozed out into a doleful whine. "Just when he had come back, and we thought it was to be all right. If he had stayed away altogether! But as if to make it the very worst——"

"Worst! If you talk of worst——" interrupted her husband, unable to keep it longer to himself, "I can tell you it might have been worse, whatever you may think."

"How?" incredulously.

"Humph!"

"There's no use pretending, doctor; it's just the very worst thing that could have happened. She has lost him——"

"But no one else has gained him."

Then Mrs Hunt understood.

"*That*, I always told you, my dear, was nonsense. You never would believe me. But I am clear in my own mind. I shall say to my dying day that if he had lived Maria would have been his wife."

"Say it if you please, my dear; unfortunately your saying it won't make it any more certain. If you take my advice, however, you will say it to no one but yourself."

Again she looked at her husband.

His tone was biting. His eye was bloodshot. He was evidently disturbed in his inner man.

And he had dined so peacefully off the boiled

fowls, which she had treated them to, confessedly in honour of the day. No shock, no blow, albeit of the severest, could have had power to disturb the digestion of that gentle meal.

He was unreasonably cross. Was she not suffering as well as he? And why should they not suffer together?

And why was she to be deprived of the consolation of consoling Maria? And was it not hard that it should never be known that the Hill with all its glories had so nearly been reigned over by the doctor's daughter?

She made one more effort.

"I must say, Robert, I think it is but due to the girl that people should know of the attentions he paid her. They were talked about, you know. Even the Tolletons——"

"The Tolletons!" snapped from his lips like the shutting of a steel clasp. "You had better not make a fool of yourself to the Tolletons!"

"Robert! You made me jump!"

"You will have it, ma'am; I would have kept it from you if I could. The Tolletons, if you must

know, lose far more in Mr Smith than ever you or your daughter would have done."

The sheet she was turning fell from his wife's hands.

She was awake now, and soon, too soon, she knew the whole.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A NEW PART.

SITTING by her husband's side, and hearing from his lips the blasting of her last grain of comfort, Mrs Hunt gave up all powers of resistance.

Her rock had fallen, and now there was not even sand for her to cast her anchor into.

Words failed. Mechanically her fingers drew the sheet again upon her knee, but the needle moved not. She never turned a sheet again without its giving her a shiver.

When the first pain had become somewhat deadened, however, she could form a resolution. Come what might, no word of this should ever cross her lips. She might think her own thoughts, and suspect her own suspicions, but to no human being would she ever own them. She would boldly scout

the idea of Helen Tolleton; and if the Fultons were mentioned, shake her head.

As far as she could, she would avoid the subject altogether.

Such reticence, however, was soon seen to be impossible. Every one was talking about the ring. It was the romance of the death. It gave a tone, a flavour, an essence of delightful mystery to the sad occurrence. It was all that was left of Mr Smith to talk, think, wonder about.

Mrs Hunt, called upon for her opinion, gave it roundly.

The ring! Yes, of course she had heard about the ring. The doctor had told her, and he had been the first to whom it was shown. What did she think of it? What every one else did, she supposed. Then she paused.

Would there be a whisper of Maria? Maria was never once hinted at.

Miss Bain boldly ranged herself on the side of Miss Tolleton.

She was wondered at, protested at, insinuated at, but she held her own. Ay, Helen Tolleton! Just

her, and no one else. Pray, why not? What had Mrs Hunt to say against it?

Only this, that Mrs Hunt would never have been more surprised at anything in her life. The very last person in all the world who would have entered Mrs Hunt's head. The very last likely to have attracted Mr Smith's notice.

All this 'Melia understood perfectly.

"She went half mad at the notion!" chuckled she to Lyddy, afterwards. "By which I knew she had got an inkling of it beforehand. Something or somebody had given them the hint."

It was after this that the doctor's wife began to propagate vehemently that idea of an abstract Mrs Smith which she maintained for some time.

Those many weeks' absence had not been for nothing. They should soon have seen a mistress of the Hill, they might take her word for it. Some one he had met abroad. Some relation of Colonel Aytoun's, or Sir George Lorrimer's. No doubt it would have been a great thing for the neighbourhood.

It was a thousand pities, poor man! At his time of life, racketing hither and thither, and all the

business of courting a lady of position, had been too much for him.

Who the lady was would no doubt be announced in the papers ; but she owned she should have liked to have heard it from himself.

The words slipped through her lips. They were lying there in keeping with the mask she wore, and were spoken almost before they were thought.

She had not meant to tell absolute falsehoods. But when every look, and nod, and shake of the head was unreal, the glib asseveration rose spontaneously.

Yet she knew that to have heard it from himself would have been more dreadful to her than anything else she could have imagined.

Well, what did she gain? An assenting face, which burst out laughing the moment her back was turned. That was all, Mrs Hunt. You were too old to learn a new part in the play.

It was generally felt, however, that although Mrs Hunt might not believe in what she said herself, there was truth in it.

They gave no credence to her faith in the story, but nevertheless it was their own opinion.

Mr Smith had been seeking his mate elsewhere.

He had probably come down to make new arrangements; and new times had been in store for the villagers.

As this conviction forced itself upon them, their regrets grew.

It was ordained otherwise; but they must say, to their poor minds it seemed a sad pity.

And they wondered that Providence should be so overbearing; and though, of course, it must be submitted to, yet it was under protest, as considering it a somewhat strange and short-sighted dispensation.

If Mr Smith was to come there at all, he ought to have been permitted to stay.

Who would be the next? Who would come after him. What would become of his money? What would be seen of his relations?

Talk, talk went the village; clack, clack the gossips; and in the midst of them all, in the house he had built, in the home he had hoped to gladden, lay the silent, speechless, unrevealing clay, from which the spirit had departed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN GET IT IN THAT WAY!"

"At least she will have that!" The dejected tone came from Lily Tolleton, and she alluded to the diamond ring.

Poor Helen had been defrauded of everything else—her husband, her house, her jewels, and her carriages; but at least, for all she had gone through, "for all her pains, for all her cares," she would have that.

Little indeed was a single ring for one who had so lately contemplated whole sets and caskets of precious stones. It had been regarded simply as the earnest of what was to come; and behold! it was all that was left.

Still Lily felt that it was something. Two days had passed during which she had thought there would be nothing. Since his engagement it was all

but impossible that Mr Smith should have made a fresh will, bequeathing to their sister any portion of those worldly goods with which at his marriage he would have promised to endow her, and the whole brilliant future had faded like a mirage—not only a prospect that was no more, but one that had never really existed at all.

Helen had refused to discuss the subject. It would do no one any good, she had said wearily, and she would rather not.

Now, however, she roused herself. Lily had adverted to the ring in her presence.

"I don't understand what you mean!" said she. "What have I to do with it?"

"It is your ring, Nelly; the one he went to London for."

"It would have been mine, but that is nothing now."

"Why nothing? Of course it is yours, all the same."

"Very well if you will, but I shall never see it."

"Do you mean that they won't give it you?"

"How are they to know?"

"If they don't know, we can tell them. You can show them the letter."

Helen's eyes flashed. "The letter? What can you be thinking of? Show his letter!"

"Why not? You need not show the whole; just enough to prove the fact. The last sentence about the ring, and the signature, would be enough."

"If I thought I could do a thing like that!" cried Helen, "I would—— And what would be the reward? A trinket I could never bear to look upon."

"You have had other trinkets you never could bear to look upon. You——" Lily stopped short, frightened. "There now, don't be angry. I am so vexed myself, that I don't know what I'm saying. I thought at least you would have that."

"I am not angry," said Helen, in a low voice; "but you must never say those things again. It is strange that you should think it likely to make me forget myself a second time, being reminded that I did once, and have been ashamed of it ever since."

"Yes, I know," said Lily, penitently; "but this is quite different."

"It is different, but I am different too. So mercenary——"

"Not altogether mercenary. You had a great regard for him, and would like to wear it for his sake."

"I had such a regard for him," replied her sister, "that his very memory would stand up and condemn me if I did. Wear it for his sake! If it had been a shabby bit of brass should I have liked to wear it? If it had been an ugly widow's cap, or a great crape veil! No, thank heaven! I know myself better, and I am not such a hypocrite as that!"

"Perhaps they may find out, and send it to you," suggested Lily's sanguine spirit. "You would wear it if it were given you, I suppose?"

Helen made no answer for a few minutes. Then she burst out suddenly—

"The way he trusted me! The way he believed in me! And he thought me so good, and so—— Oh, it is hard!" cried she, sobbing. "I shall never have such another chance—never! I should like to have his ring, no one knows how much; but I would rather die than get it in that way!"

Helen speaking like that! Helen weeping for her lover! It was incomprehensibly awful. Lily stole from her presence, rebuked and abashed.

At the Castle they were talking about the ring too.

Sir George Lorrimer, who was the dead man's sole executor, had brought it there, and, showing

it to Sauffrenden, suggested, "Don't you think she ought to have it?"

To his surprise Sauffrenden demurred.

"The only thing is," said he, "that it might be considered as an insult."

"An insult!"

"Supposing he had not asked her?"

"In that case he would surely not have bought the ring. You heard what his own anticipations were. And I can only say," continued Sir George, with warmth, "that there never was any one in this world who was more certain to have said what he meant. He was as true——"

"You mistake me altogether," cried Sauffrenden, eagerly. "I have not the shadow of a doubt that he was sincere. But might he not have taken a little hope, picked up his courage; you know we all gave him to understand what we thought?"

"But why should you suppose the offer had not been made?"

"Because I can't find out," said Sauffrenden, honestly, "when it could have been done. I have been inquiring everywhere, and there seems to me to have been no time. He came down on Wednesday,

wrote her a letter that evening, which she never answered. Then he did not leave his house again till he went to town next day, driving straight to and from the station."

"But the letter—the letter was enough."

"She never answered it."

"No matter. Depend upon it there was some arrangement."

"An arrangement to see him, that's what I have made up my mind that it was. Perhaps he bade her not answer if the hour suited. He was going out, no doubt, to her, the night he died."

"With the ring in his pocket," said Sir George, thoughtfully. "It was very unlike him."

They began to talk about the funeral.

"Ah! the funeral!" said Sauffrenden, sighing. "Who would have thought of that last Tuesday? There he was, as hale and hearty as the best of us. And, by Jove! what a voice he had when he jumped on his legs, and knocked the decanter over. I think I never heard three sweeter sounds in my life than those three words he called Aytoun! To think of its ending in this!"

Sir George sighed too.

"And we had all been abusing him," continued Sauffrenden, "and only just put it right again. Even Milly would have been pleased. I wish she could have known before, if it had been only for a day. The most disappointing thing! If it had taken place before all this came out, I should not have cared half so much. Poor dear old boy! To think it has all happened since Tuesday morning! We did not half like meeting him you know, Wellwood and I. We were quite cross with him, and thought he had behaved very shabbily. I shook hands with him very coldly indeed, and so did Philip. I wish we hadn't now."

"He didn't notice it, I'm sure, Sauffrenden."

"He could hardly have helped noticing it. I showed what I felt pretty pointedly, I know. He must have thought us nasty, capricious sort of fellows; and if there is one thing in the world I dislike to be thought, it is capricious."

His compunction made the other smile.

"Really, my dear fellow, you take it too much to heart. What you may have felt I can't pretend to say, but no one would ever have suspected it was anything so very virulent from your manner."

"He would, though. He knew how friendly I had always been. I shall never cease to be sorry for it."

"At any rate you made it up with him afterwards."

"Yes, I hope I did that," brightening. "I think I showed him the difference then. I tell you, Lorrimer, when I saw the turn things were taking, and that great brute getting brought to book at last, I felt myself getting awfully queer. It wouldn't have taken much more to have made a baby of me on the spot!"

"Nor some others either, or I am mistaken."

This was delightful. The simple fellow thought he meant himself, and pressed his arm approvingly.

The reader will scarcely be so credulous. Sir George's nature was not emotional. It is hardly necessary to whisper that the allusion was to Philip Wellwood.

Philip had not yet returned to the neighbourhood. He had gone off after the dinner-party, leaving a note for his friend to say that he had run down to Ryde with a cousin, who was buying a yacht, and wished him to inspect it.

He left his address there, and bade Sauffrenden send him all the news. He thought he might stay a week or two, and go round the island. Some fellows he was once quartered with were at Newport.

Sauffrenden, in some dudgeon, had had his last day in town alone; but his spirits had returned on reflection that he had now not only his wife to tell about Colonel Aytoun's dinner-party, but would probably have Philip to tell about Mr Smith's engagement.

Mr Smith had not been dead many hours before he sent off the full account of his untimely end.

The next day but one saw Philip at Eastworld and at Sauffrenden.

"You are come for the funeral," said his friend, greatly pleased. "I'm glad you have. I thought you would."

If he had had his way not a man in or near Eastworld would have been absent.

His grooms, his gardeners, his footmen, all saw that it gratified him when they asked to go. He sent invitations through Sir George Lorrimer to half the county, and he never to his dying day forgave the Admiral, who was actually at the Hall, but who,

after confounding the card, took no further notice of it.

The funeral was all that was left of Mr Smith, and enough could not be made of it.

Every one he met going to attend, had his approving nod, and he scanned the faces in the churchyard even while he walked beside the coffin.

There was one rough-looking fellow whom he did not know. Fletcher would tell him who it was.

"From the north, my lord." Fletcher anticipated him. "Says he would have come if it had been a thousand miles. He has his tale to tell, and has been telling it to my missis and me; and though his jargon ain't easy made out, yet it's worth the listening to."

"Is it about poor Mr Smith?"

"Yes, my lord, it is. It seems this Haword, or Hawood, or whatever he calls himself, had known the poor gentleman that's gone many a year. He's from Liverpool, and talks of the river, crossing the river, which it seems he has to do, morning and evening, to his work. He was going over one day,. it's more than thirty years ago, he says, when he was just out of the hospital, and they thought he was

going in a consumption. His cough seemed as if it would shake him to bits, and there was a fog and an easterly wind. Mr Smith, as was a young man then, turned and looked at him several times, and at last says he, 'You have got no greatcoat, friend.' And then, without another word, off with his own, and put it on him."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sauffrenden. "Well?"

"He made him keep it till next day," Fletcher proceeded, not too lucidly; "'and,' said he, 'you should have been welcome to it, but I'm not able to afford another.' But by the next night he, that's Mr Smith" (seeing that his auditor was getting mystified), "brought him a bran-new one, and said it was a present from the gentlemen on 'Change. He had collected the money among them."

"I never knew he had been in business," said Lord Sauffrenden.

"I'm coming to that, my lord. He was only a lad then, as you may say. This was to be the making of him. It seems there was some old gentleman who saw the affair of the coat, and took a fancy to him then and there. And the end of it was, he left him his fortin'," concluded the narrator triumphantly.

He had got to the point of his story at last, and it justified him.

My lord's face of astonishment! My lord's unqualified belief and satisfaction! It was worth anything.

"He's in the back parlour, now," suggested the postmaster, softly.

Then the stranger was summoned. He corroborated all that had been said. Mr Smith never liked it talked about, but it was well known in the place he came from. Mr Smith was respected everywhere. He often used to go and see them all. He had no relations to speak of, no near ones at any rate. His family had been well known, though there were none left now. They had been terribly sorry to hear of his death—that was, himself and his mates. He had said he would come to his funeral if it was a thousand miles. "May I make bold to ask, my lord," he concluded, "if he was a friend of yours?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Lord Sauffrenden, heartily. "I hope he would have grown to be much more of one, but he seemed scarcely come among us ere he was gone."

"To think," he added, mentally, "that I should ever have been cold to him!"

"Ay," said the man, "that was always the way. Come or go, he had friends everywhere, and friends of the right sort too. They say he knew a prince once, when he was in furrin parts, but I don't know," added he, cautiously. "It was only folks' talk maybe."

"It was very likely true," said Lord Sauffrenden, rising. "The prince would be well off, if it were."

Then he left, and the stranger gave it as his opinion that if all lords were like that, they would be none the worse of a few in his part of the world.

"Never spoke to one before," said he; "but they seem a deal more free than our Liverpool gents. My word! there aren't many of them that would sit and answer you like that. Ay, we could do with a few more of that kind, up with us."

The funeral over, every one wondered what was to come next.

Mr Smith and Eastworld had shaken hands; they would see his face no more.

They had grown accustomed to his grey wide-awake and thick whiskers, his quick step and ready smile; they had even begun to feel a pride in him. If he had only been one of themselves!

Well, he could not help that; all that could be done had been done. He had come among them; that, in itself, was a token for good. He had voluntarily settled down, struck root, and even, it now appeared, desired to bud and blossom there.

His children, at least, would have belonged to the place; and the house on the Hill might have been to posterity an ancestral mansion.

All this was now changed; they had laid him beneath the sod, and what was to come next?

The house was to be sold.

That was the first whisper, and anew hopes and expectations were kindled, that the next advent would prove a family.

They were ready with new faces for the newcomers. New recommendations for a new master; bows and scrapes, if it might be so, for a new madam.

Ere the churchyard was empty, tongues were wagging. All were for the future: the past was buried with the dead; as useless, as unprofitable.

Lord Sauffrenden's thoughts reverted to the diamond ring.

Since his conversation about it, he had made a

new discovery, and ever after he felt ashamed of not having made it sooner.

It was the greatest oversight he had ever been guilty of, and he could not understand to the last day of his life how he came to have been so blind.

Not only had Mr Smith been at Freelands, but he had been there some time, and he had seen Miss Tolleton.

How in the world came he, Sauffrenden, not to have heard it before?

Now, of course, there was no doubt about the ring.

Sir George could not remain to take it, and hesitated whom to ask.

"Suppose I go," said Sauffrenden, earnestly. "You would not send valuable jewels by a man?"

"It might be awkward for you, after what has passed."

"One should not regard that, at such a time, and there is really no one else."

"Captain Wellwood? He is a friend of the family."

"Philip! Oh!" trying to hide his disappointment. "Ye—s; if he will. But I don't believe he will. If

he *likes* to go, of course he would be a good one to do it."

Philip testified neither liking nor disliking. He would take the ring, if Sir George wished. He was going back to Ryde next day, so would take it that afternoon.

"And what shall you say to her?" inquired Sauffrenden, wistfully.

"That's of no consequence, I imagine. There will be no difficulty in explaining the circumstances."

"Be sure you say he thought she would refuse him."

"I don't see how that would be to the purpose."

"Shall you tell her how we came to know about it?"

"I don't know that I need."

"Shall you say anything about Aytoun?"

"I don't know."

"Shall you say——"

"It is of no use asking me what I shall say, Sauffrenden; I have never thought about it. What can it signify a pin's point? If Sir George wishes it, I will take the ring, and what I say or do not say on giving it, cannot be of the slightest importance."

"I shall be much obliged if you will," said Sir George, taking a look at him. ("Half way in, my friend! Now it will depend very much on how she behaves this afternoon, whether it's over the head, or a dry jump out on the other side.")

"I told you he would not like it," said Sauffrenden, ruefully watching his friend depart. "I told you he would not care to go, and I think it was almost a pity he was asked. A young fellow, you know, on such an occasion, is, to say the truth, hardly appropriate. You or I would have been far better."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT THE TURNING-POINT.

And thus Helen got her ring, though, alas! the giver came not with the gift.

She took it very quietly, at once allowed her engagement, but said nothing of her loss.

Captain Wellwood, she was well aware, was not one who would sympathise, even had she wanted sympathy, which she did not. He could not participate in the feelings of her family, nor would he believe in her own. He would think, as all the world thought, that she was rightly served. Perhaps he was even laughing at her in his sleeve.

It was true, she saw no trace of exultation in his look; and in the "Miss Tolleton, I believe this belongs to you," with which he simply placed the case in her hand, there was a tone of respectful gravity which almost touched her.

But she knew Philip. He could be anything he chose. She herself possessed a like gift, and had been proud of it once. Of late she had come to think she had been better without.

That day, at least, she would not act, let him say or do what he would.

She would not even sit down. She stood and received the ring, gravely bending her graceful head, and thanking him in cold, sweet tones for the trouble he had taken. Yes, she would like to have it; it was kind of them to send it to her. She begged he would thank Sir George Lorrimer.

And then she laid down the case.

Philip began to falter.

He wished she would speak to him, he wished she would look at him, he wished to goodness she would not stand there with that impenetrable face, as if she was not either sorry or glad, or possessed of any feeling at all.

He would have given a good deal to know what she was thinking about. Failing that, he would have given something to be safely out of the house again.

Her manner seemed to say, "Go, your presence is

intrusive; your speech impertinent. It is only because I am sad and sick at heart that I tolerate you."

If she would only have looked at the ring! If she would only have listened to his explanation! But he began, and saw her frown, and then he made up his mind that it would be best to leave it all unsaid, and go.

She gave her hand, and another mechanical "thank you," and he left the room.

What could it mean? It set him wondering, wondering.

Was it possible, barely possible, not to be ridiculous, that she could have entertained any feeling of —of love for the man she had elected for her husband?

He did not think so; he could not bring himself to think so.

Regard there might be; he had even taught himself to imagine that, mingled with it, there had been a shade of warmth, a kindly glow of gratitude, or something of that sort. But beyond this, no. No, Helen, no; it would not do. It was too much to expect that that should be believed in.

She had done very well. But the drama had been played out; and behind the scenes how much would be found real?

Faugh! Whose voice was that in his ear?

Mrs Hunt's.

"A fine afternoon, Captain Wellwood. You have been at Freelands?"

How in the world had she crept so close? He had heard no step. He had been absorbed.

Yes, he had been at Freelands.

"And the ladies there in as great force as ever?"

"They were not in any particular force."

"No? Well, I thought Helen a little pale still, a little quiet perhaps, but then you know, she has had a moping time of it lately. No balls, no amusements, no gentlemen. Bless me! what am I saying? But I fancy," with a knowing little laugh, "that Miss Tolleton's predilections are pretty well known. The races will set her all right again."

Captain Wellwood disdained her too much to reply.

"His Majesty did not even vouchsafe me a bow this time," said she to her husband afterwards. "He jumped over the stile and up to the Castle, as if he was lord of all. I wonder they put up with him

there, I am sure. The rudest, most disagreeable man I ever met in my life!"

"Mamma! Captain Wellwood!"

It was the incautious Maria who spoke.

"Yes, my dear, Captain Wellwood. And, Captain or no Captain, that's what I think of him. But of course you and Clare think otherwise. Fine feathers make fine birds." Then, softening a little, "Poor dear Mr Smith, how different he always was!"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated her husband, impatiently, "I'm tired of Mr Smith. Mr Smith was all very well, but one hears nothing but his name now, from morning till night. If a man gets drowned, or shot, or hung, he is an angel in the eyes of some people. For pity's sake let Mr Smith rest in his grave in peace, Polly."

The petulant outburst surprised them all.

"I am sure he may rest for me," replied Mrs Hunt; "but I must say what I always thought of him—from the very first, as the girls know. Dead or living," she continued, with a sense of magnanimity, "it makes no difference."

"Don't be too sure of that, my dear."

"Sure! Why not sure?" with a swift, caution-

ary glance at her daughters. "What should make you say that? You have the oddest ways, my dear."

"It is just as well that you should know——"

"Now, girls, don't dawdle about any longer. Go up-stairs at once, and make yourselves tidy."

"Stay — let them wait a minute; they had better hear it as well as you, since it will be all over the country to-morrow. That diamond ring has gone to Miss Tolleton."

"She never has! It isn't true! That girl would swear black was white, or white was black, to serve her end! What fool has believed her? Who has dared to give it her? The brazen-faced——"

"You had better not, Polly. If people hear you raving like that, they might wonder, you know. I thought, perhaps, you would not be so ready with your tongue in poor Smith's praise when this came round to you!"

"Ready! It was not *him!* *He* never thought of such a thing! It is she who has got up the whole farce from beginning to end, and to think that she should get this too! Oh, what idiots people are! Who gave it her? And who told you?"

Of course it was Lord Sauffrenden who had told him.

Lord Sauffrenden, debarred from the pleasure of conveying the gift, could at least enjoy the satisfaction of proclaiming it.

He remembered his last interview with Dr Hunt. He caught him in the village. Openly he exulted over him. Cruelly he probed him.

The doctor was still smarting when he returned to his house. No wonder his wife's note of praise made the blood from the wound spurt forth afresh. No wonder he surprised them.

She was now eager to know the circumstances.

What business had Lord Sauffrenden to interfere? Just because he was a lord——

"Lord Sauffrenden had nothing to do with it."

"Then who had?"

"Sir George Lorrimer. I told you it was handed over to him."

"And she goes to him, and makes a long mouth, and cries, and pretends—I have no patience when I think of it! A married man! He ought to be ashamed of himself! To be cozened by that woman!"

"I daresay he was. But as it happens he has not seen her."

"How did she claim it, then?"

"It appears she did not claim it."

A howl of disbelief. "She not claim it! If she swore that upon the rack, she wouldn't take me in! Who did claim it, if she didn't? Her father, I suppose. Sent off to the Castle with weepers in his hat, and they watching him from the windows. It made me sick to see him at the funeral, spying and fawning."

Dr Hunt scratched his chin, thoughtfully. This was a new view of the case.

He had been distinctly told that Miss Tolleton had not mentioned her engagement, and put in no claim to the ring; but not a word had been said of her father.

"There may be something in that," said he, at last.

"Tell me word for word what was told you, and I'll soon find out the truth," demanded the virago.

"What Lord Sauffrenden told me?"

"Yes, of course."

"That as Mr Smith was engaged to Miss Tolleton,

there was no doubt the ring was meant for her, and Sir George had accordingly sent it."

"By whom?"

"He didn't say."

"But did you not ask how he knew that he was engaged to her?"

"Of course I did. I said no one here had heard of it, and hinted as broadly as I could that I should like some proof."

"Well, what had he to say to that?"

"He looked rather my lord, which he doesn't often do, and said that he and Sir George were satisfied on the point. They had not learnt it from the Tolletons. Yes, by the way, he said the Tolletons. Their authority was indisputable. The engagement had taken place the day before he died."

"Humph! Don't believe a word of it. She'll never get a husband, try as she may."

"She was pretty near it this time, at all events. I told you before what I thought, Polly; it is of no use your taking it as if it were a new thing."

Here Maria silently looked at her mother. She and Clare had not spoken a word, and they had been overlooked altogether.

But Mrs Hunt caught the look, and felt obliged to take more heed of her words.

"Only after he was dead, my dear, and I thought it wasn't worth while mentioning it. We never thought—that's to say——Maria," said her mother quite gently, "you had better go up-stairs now."

Maria went, and one other question was put.

"Will everybody know?"

"Yes, of course."

And thus it came to pass that Mr Smith's last wish was carried out. He had cleared her name. Not, perhaps as he had thought to clear it; but still in a way dear to her pride, in a way that made her bless his memory.

He had been proud of his choice. He had proclaimed it even within the few hours of life left to him after they parted; for thus she had erroneously read Philip's explanation.

Her heart swelled at the thought.

And those to whom he had given his confidence had not been backward in avowing it. They had, of their own free-will, accorded her the place she would have held, and sent her the ring she would have worn. It was too much. She would never have

sought it. She had forbidden her family to say a word. She had let it all go, and what she felt or suffered was for herself alone.

Those whose impertinence led them to address her on the subject, gave it as their opinion that Miss Tolleton was curiously altered. It was nonsense to suppose that she had cared for that old man, but certainly she had shown more proper feeling on the occasion than could have been expected.

"Wait till the autumn, and you'll see her cast off her properness, as an adder does its slough," said Mrs Hunt, grimly. "She will come out in greater style than ever, after this fine piece of work. I have no faith in reformations."

There were those, however, who, when they heard her say this, thought of sour grapes.

Miss Tolleton was still young, and well, she might improve.

They hoped it would last, that was all.

And what does she herself think?

"Oh no, I am not changed, not really changed in the least. I have been thinking all this while that I am, and others think so too, and yet down in my heart I know they are wrong. The change, if there

is to be one, has yet to come. I fancied I had grown to dislike the old life with its wild wicked ways, and after all it was only because the new one tempted me more. If he had not been what he was, I should have seen it sooner; but it was so difficult to see that there could be any attraction with him except just the money, and that, I might have had before. I thought I was so wise, and nice, and good to take to it all.

"And now that there is nothing to look for, and nobody to lead me, and no chance of anything better, am I to let go all, and drift away to what I was before? What shall I do? Which way shall I go?"

This was the burden of her heart.

She must make her choice, once for all. She was no longer blind and ignorant; she had eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

She saw, darkly it is true, but nevertheless she saw before her the two paths. For a while the narrow one had presented itself to her eyes as the more charming of the two. All the pleasant things had been along its banks, all that was bright and bewitching within its gates.

But could she make up her mind to enter as these faded from her view?

The prospect had changed. It looked dull, cold, uninteresting. Could she ever be allured to it again?

So good had God been to her, that hitherto her own base passions had been the bonds which His love had used to draw her forward, and by them she had been brought to the turning-point.

The bonds were withdrawn. She perceived the ground on which she stood.

Ah! what a check was there! Her feet rested on no pilgrim soil. Her journey had not yet begun. She was left looking on that shorn, bare, stony road no longer draped in rainbow tints, and what was she to make of it? The other lay close at hand, decked in tinsel gewgaws. One on her right hand, one on her left. Heaven help her wandering, wavering feet!

God be with thee, poor Helen! This is thy offer of mercy; this is thy day of grace. Thy great, wonderful, inestimable opportunity; thy life.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER.

LORD SAUFFRENDEN TO CAPTAIN WELLWOOD.

"DEAR PHIL,—I don't know how in the world I have been so long in writing to you. I have sat down dozens of times, but always got up again. Very glad to get yours, all the same. What sport you must have had! I would have given anything for a day after those jungle fellows. Rather a different sort of thing from potting pheasants, I should think! We have just begun that old story here, but they are not so good as usual. The new fellow was not as clever with the young ones as old Hislop. As you see the papers, you won't care for any public news. If a dissolution does come, it might be rather awkward, but I think we could weather it. By the way, that reminds me that Fred Percy (who has just got into the Foreign Office) told me to *be sure* to tell

you to see his brother, if you were anywhere near Peshore—I know that's not the way to spell it, but there's nobody to tell me what is. He has had the fever, but is all right again, and would be awfully glad to see you. So go if you can, and send him a line about it, like a good fellow. It was queer your coming across Aytoun. I suppose, since his wife's death, he is quite the gay young bachelor again. I don't wonder at Lord M.'s giving him the cold shoulder,—*do you?* All here much as usual. Poor Smith's house sold at last, and the new people, a *varnish-maker* and his family, come down this week. The first thing they did was to stick on spires and horns and all sorts of excrescences, and transmogrify the whole building. The Dowager gave us a day or two last week, blooming as ever, and we had Best to meet her, but they didn't make it out! Rosy's wedding fixed for next month. We are going to town about her present to-morrow, and wish you were here to give us the benefit of your taste. Wife's love: she's all right again now, thanks, and says you are not to go and get *grey*.—I am, dear Phil, yours affectionately, SAUFFRENDEN.

"*P.S.*—When *are* you coming home?

"*P.S.*—Who do you think are coming to stay with us, but the *T's!*"

This was the letter which the English mail brought Philip Wellwood; and which he received lying on his bed under the waving punkah, gazing on the far, far distant peaks of the Himalayas, weary of the eternal sunshine, feeling sick and cross, and ill at ease with all around him.

The letter was not to his mind. He did wish Sauffrenden could write a decent letter. What pleasure could a letter like that afford anybody? There were such lots of things he might have said instead of spending his time over that rubbish of Smith's house, and the *T's.*

The *T's* at Sauffrenden certainly was a revolution, but even a revolution is sometimes hardly worth a postscript.

Nevertheless, he sent a postscript back. "Pray remember me to the ladies at Freelands."

By-and-by Sauffrenden wrote again. "The Tolletons"—no longer the *T's*—"have been with us at Brighton. Helen made a sensation there, I can tell you."

"I daresay she did," thought Philip. "If that fool Balmaine had seen her, he might have talked of a pretty girl. But, good heavens! Louise O'Flinn! They would rave about a she-ape out here."

It was soon after this that Philip discovered he was tired of the Himalayas.

Spring was come again; and he thought of the cool rustle of the leaves in an English valley; of the shining winding river; the busy little town; his old friends and his old ways; and felt himself home-sick.

His little place was sold, but he would go to Sauffrenden if they would have him.

Accordingly one still June evening he drove along the familiar road.

New things met his eye at every turn.

There was a new gate, and a new approach; and newest of all there was a little white bundle being carried in state up and down the flowery terrrace, for whose appearance he had indeed been prepared, but which nevertheless gave him a shock.

And he was just as strange to them.

Trivial alterations to which they had long grown accustomed caught his eye.

He wanted to know where this had gone, and

when that had come? At every turn it was "Oh, was *that* not before you left?" and "You must recollect this, it has been here so long."

He remembered forgotten stories. He quoted old sayings. He revived the things that had passed away.

Sauffrenden felt that, come what might, he never could let his Philip go again.

"It's delightful to have you back again, old boy, give us your fist," said he, times without number. "And now," he added, as the hour of luxury came, when the two strolled out into the twilight, and floating on the fragrant clouds confidences passed; "now, you must not go away again, never no more, as the books say. Bengal may be all very fine, but you have done it thoroughly, and will never need to blow off your steam again. Take example by me, settle down among us, and have a wife and boy of your own."

"Hear him!" cried Philip. "As if wives and boys to order grew on every tree! By the by, that boy of yours, as you call him, little white bundle of night-shirt as I call him, he is an innovation. I don't approve of innovations. I meant to find you

all exactly as I left you, and he upsets the whole order of things."

"But is he not a delightful little wretch? Nurse declares he knew me to-day, and I really think he did. He has got our carroty locks, too. And you wouldn't have the old place go away from us? I can tell you I didn't like the idea of that at all, neither did Milly. How do you think she is looking?"

"Very well indeed. Never saw her look better in my life."

"That's what every one says," delighted.

"The fact is, you know," confidentially, "she has never been well before. She's all right now. And we're going to have a run in the Percys' yacht by-and-by. Take the little un with us. He is three months old now, and nurse thinks the sea-air would be grand for him. But I don't know. What if he should be sick?"

Philip's great "haw, haw," sounded up to Lady Sauffrenden's bedroom.

"You'll make a rare good father, old fellow. One would think you had been in the nursery all your life. Do you consult this oracle every day?"

"You would, too, if you had one of your own."

"Which I have no prospect of having."

"No? None? Really and truly? Then we'll begin and look you out a mate at once. If we don't, you'll be slipping off again. Let me see. There's Helen, my paragon Helen, and Freelands is hers now; you would be close by. But perhaps she wouldn't suit you; and besides, I am pledged to Fred."

"By the way," said Philip, "I have never asked after the Tolletons."

"Ah! you might have asked after them slap out before Milly, now. The most wonderful change in that quarter. She and Helen can't see enough of each other."

"No! Wonders never cease."

"I told you they came here, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was all."

"Oh, but it isn't all, by any means. It began by little and little, but lately it has grown like Alice in Wonderland."

"And what made the difference?"

"She's different, that's the thing. I can't tell you how, but every one knows. She's not like the same

creature; she's become, you know"—lowering his voice—"so very religious."

"Religious!"

"And all that sort of thing. And Milly swears by her. Whatever Helen tells her, she'll do. It's no sham—it's a fact. Wait till you see for yourself. And, by Jove! she's handsomer than ever. Fred's poor penniless heart is set upon her, but they'll have to wait."

"They are engaged, then?"

"Nothing of the sort, nor can be. He can barely keep himself; but we are trying to get a good thing for him, and if we manage it, he will be at her feet to-morrow."

"And will she have him?"

"I don't know; I suppose so. He's a capital fellow. We'll take them in the yacht, and you too, if you'll come. The only pity is they couldn't live here, and Freelands is a nice place. However, it would be just the thing for you, now that you have a few thousands more, and we'll look you out a wife in no time."

"No hurry; the other affair isn't settled yet."

"Well, we shall hear in a week, and I don't think B. would refuse me."

"But that is only the preliminary. How do you know she cares for him?"

"I tell you I don't know; I only suppose so. She never was the girl to show her likings or dislikings unless she chose, and now she wouldn't flirt with a parson."

"Oh!"

A pause.

"How are the others?"

"Carry's married, you know. She goes along with Helen in everything, and the consequence is that she bagged the very first curate who came in Rodney's place. Rodney has got a living, not much of one, but still an advance—somewhere in Devonshire. I don't think Lily half likes the new state of things. She takes herself off whenever she can. She was always the worst of the three."

"That she was!" said Philip, with a vivid recollection of Lily's eye upon him, in olden times. "Is she here now?"

"I don't know. No, of course she is not; for

Helen is to come up here to-morrow, because she's alone. We asked Fred to meet her, but he could not get away. She will be with us a week, at least. Ah, what a pity it is, it isn't you!"

But need we tell the reader that it *was* him? That before the week was over, Fred's chance, if he had ever had one, was blown to the winds? That Lord and Lady Sauffrenden, cruel people, threw over their poor cousin without a pang, and declared that all along Philip and Helen had been made for each other?

And what with the little boat that only held two, and the little paths that were only broad enough for two, and the evening strolls, and the nightingales, and the glowworms, and the thousand and one other sweet influences which were brought to bear—there was no resisting the speed with which they were hurried along to their destiny.

A week! Helen stayed three. Lord Sauffrenden would have been deeply hurt if the matter had been concluded anywhere but under his own roof, or on his own grounds; and having caught and caged his birds, he closed every aperture of escape.

So it came to pass that one balmy night, when

they had all been out under the cedars, and the scent of the sweet syringas had been almost too luscious, that Helen came in, in her white gown, and stood before her friend.

"And she never looked more beautiful in her life," narrated Milly. "So I knew in a moment it had happened. And I was as glad as if she had been my own sister!"

But what a poor match it was thought for her by the people of Eastworld, the Bartletts, the Bains, and the Hunts!

How appropriate a moral they drew! How pleased they were!

A poor thing she had made of it, after all!

After the fine company she had been meeting at the Castle, and the fuss about her at Brighton.

To have to take up with her old flame, Philip Wellwood!

That was what girls came to, in spite of their looks, when they didn't know how to behave themselves. Give them good manners instead of good looks, any day.

And after the way she had caught that poor Mr Smith, and taken in even Lady Sauffrenden.

She changed! Yes, there was a mighty change, no doubt. She was clever enough for anything.

Lily was the only one with a grain of honesty in her composition, and she remained what she always was.

And Mrs Hunt let it be understood, though not in so many words, that she would have considered it a sin and a shame, not to say a great injustice on the part of Providence, if in the long-run Helen had been rewarded with a rich husband.

Providence had more than once appeared to be on the eve of committing this enormity, but the danger had passed by, and with Philip Wellwood she was sourly satisfied.

"They'll have to scrapple along as best they can," said she. "His fine relations will do nothing for him, I'll be bound. And her ten thousand won't go as far as she thinks, with all his extravagant army habits. They will find it little enough when the children begin to come. It is lucky for them she has the house. Old Tolleton's dropping off as he did, cleared the way for both her and Carry. My lord Wellwood did not forget that when he came forward, we may be sure."

When she said this, she little dreamed that "my lord Wellwood" was soon to be my Lord Wellwood in earnest, you understand.

When that day came, a veil had best be drawn over Mrs Hunt's feelings. Never but once in her life before had she experienced such a shock; and we all know when that was.

"Helen," said her lover, one evening in the bow window, a few days before their marriage, "you must try to teach me the lesson you have learnt since first I knew you. What has made the difference? For you *are* different, you know," said he, drawing her towards him; "tell me about it."

"I knew once," she answered, "a simple, noble, Christian gentleman——"

"That will do," said Philip, softly. "I know. Mr Smith."

THE END.

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